

The Young City Detective Pathfinder in a Tight Place!

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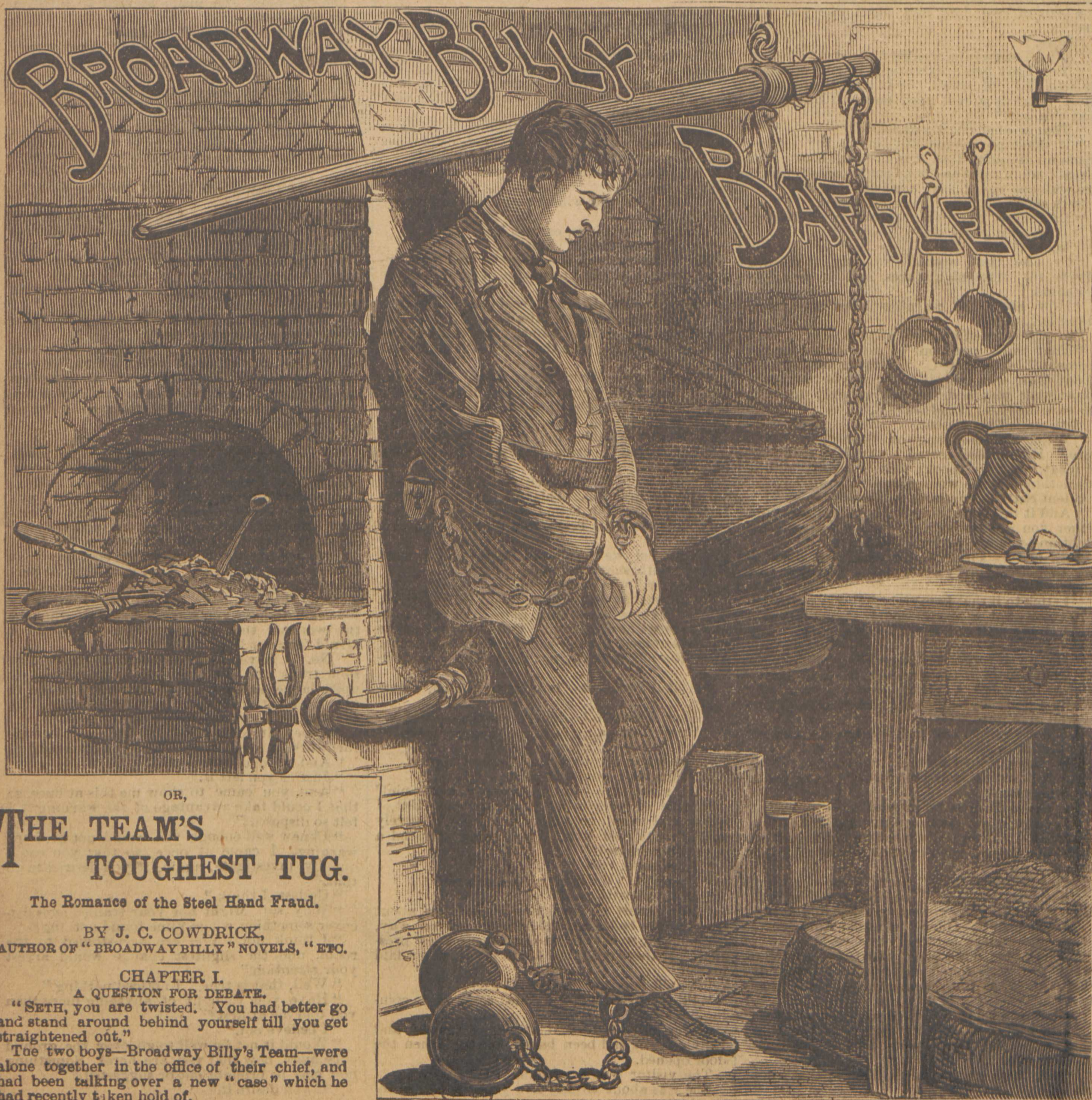
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THE TEAM'S TOUGHEST TUG.

The Romance of the Steel Hand Fraud.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, "ETC."

CHAPTER I.

A QUESTION FOR DEBATE.

"SETH, you are twisted. You had better go and stand around behind yourself till you get straightened out."

The two boys—Broadway Billy's Team—were alone together in the office of their chief, and had been talking over a new "case" which he had recently taken hold of.

Happy Harry was doing most of the talking,

"IT LOOKS AS THOUGH BROADWAY BILLY HAS BEEN BAFFLED—DONE FOR, AT LAST!"

as usual, but Seth now and then put in a word. And a remark of his had caused Harry to break forth as quoted.

"Well, maybe I am twisted," Seth quietly rejoined.

"Don't you see you are?" persisted his chum.

"We can't see ourselves as others see us," the "Stoic" quoted.

"That seems to be your case, anyhow. If you only would talk more I'd like you better, Seth; it's hard work to keep a-workin' the pump all the time, I tell you."

"Then don't work it."

"That's easy enough for you to say; but, if you wanted to draw me out as badly as I want to draw you, you would pump too."

"Not necessary to pump you; all there is to do is to turn on the faucet and let you run."

"You're talking now!"

"Because I had a fact to state!"

"Well, this is gettin' away from the subject, as the surgical students said, after one of 'em had jabbed his scalpel into a cadaver and the said cadaver set up a howl of protest that caused 'em to git out in a hurry—"

"Turn on the faucet."

"Ha, ha! You slipped up that time. You meant to say turn it off. It is on, in good shape. But, as I was coming at, we're drifting. Do you mean to tell me that the owner of the Steel Hand is a bein' of real flesh and blood, like you and me?"

"Sure."

"Then I say again, you're twisted."

"Yes, I say you are twisted," Harry repeated, as Seth did not speak. "If the Man of the Steel Hand is a real man how is it Billy can't find him out?"

"That is what puzzles us all."

"It don't puzzle me any more, for I have made up my mind that it is a ghost. How could a real man of meat and bone put his arm through the wall and never leave a mark?"

Seth shook his head; he couldn't say.

"Of course you don't know," cried Harry. "It is either a ghost, or—"

"What?"

"Or else that woman is batty, that's all. Maybe she rides nightmares, and it is all in her mind."

"How about the warning letter the Steel Hand left, then?"

Harry scratched his head at that.

"That had slipped out of my thinker for the moment," he admitted. "Nothing very spooky about that, was there? Still, maybe that came some other way and the woman only thought she saw the Steel Hand leave it."

Seth smiled his dissent.

"Well, it's one thing or the other, that's sure," Harry asseverated. "It is a real man o' meat, or it's a spook; that is ter say, unless it's nothin' and the woman dreams it all."

Silent Seth had nothing to remark.

"And it bein' one thing or the other, sure pop, either you are wrong and I am right, or I am right and you are wrong. Which is it?"

Seth merely shrugged his shoulders, disdaining to notice Harry's very poor attempt at a joke.

"I stick to it that I am right," Harry persisted. "Nothing but a spook could thrust an arm through the wall and never leave a mark. You know that."

"Have you forgot the dagger?"

"That's more of the woman's dreams," Harry declared. "It's a ghost, and if Broadway William don't find anything this time he might as well give it up."

The door opened and their young chief stepped into the office.

The boys looked at him inquiringly. They had not heard his steps, so silently had he put in an appearance.

He was smiling as he entered.

"Well, you are having a dispute, I find," he observed. "I stopped a moment and heard all. Boys, one thing I must caution you about, right here and now."

"Not to talk so loud," Harry guessed.

"That is it. And I am surprised at you, Harry, to find you expressing belief in ghosts."

"Can't help it," Harry protested stubbornly.

"Yet you know better, I am sure."

"Well, boss, don't scold this time, but tell us what you have found out, for we are just dying to know, as the school-girls put it; especially Seth."

"It is soon told. I have discovered nothing."

"Then if you hav'n't discovered anything that settles it," Harry cried; "it's ghosts an' nothing else."

"But, there are no ghosts, Harry; that's nonsense!"

"That's your opinion, but you might be mistaken. Nothin' but a ghost could enter that room and not leave some mark that Broadway Billy would find, and you are not going to make me think any other way till you bring the proof."

"Well, what do you think, Seth?" Billy asked. "I know Harry has not succeeded in converting you to his spook theory."

"I think the steel hand belongs to a real man, of course. The note and the dagger prove that, certainly. But, it is strange it baffles you so. It is a sharp scheme."

"I agree with you, Seth, in all that," the young chief of the trio declared. "At the same time there is another view to take of it, and that is this: The story of the Steel Hand may be a dream of the imagination on the part of Miss Rudloff."

Harry had shown some dejection when Billy favored Seth's view of the case, but now he brightened up instantly.

"Rah!" he cried. "That is just what I said. She may have bats in her loft, and I wouldn't be surprised if she has, either. Old gals often are batty, you know."

"Still," Billy went on, "that does not account for the note and the dagger, which, she says positively, the Steel Hand dropped in her room. If she is mistaken about the Steel Hand, then, of course, they came there by some other means, for they are substantial facts enough even for Harry's eyes."

"They ought to be evidence," Seth quietly observed.

"But, I have spent two hours examining that room, and there is positively no hole in the wall anywhere. I am puzzled."

"Ghost, I tell you! Only disembodied spirits pass through solid walls. Everybody knows that!" asserted Harry, contentiously.

"You know better, Harry; you only talk to hear yourself."

"Well, then, the whole business is humbug—that's what!"

"One of two things, certain."

"And what's them?"

When Harry was impatient he had little regard for the slight knowledge of grammar he possessed.

"Why, the Steel Hand is real enough, or it is all in the imagination of Miss Rudloff."

"Well, then, as it is 'gainst office rules to believe in ghosts, I'll take that view of it and stand on it."

"There is no other explanation," Billy went on. "But, I am inclined to think Miss Rudloff's head is level enough—that the Steel Hand is a hand of flesh and bone, and that Broadway Billy is merely baffled for the time being."

"You baffled!" cried Harry. "That's very likely!"

"Why not? Better men than I have been obliged to give up. This may be my baffler. But, we shall try it, none the less, boys. Broadway Billy and his Team won't pull out of this race."

"You bet we won't—eh, Seth?" demanded Harry, with sharp decision.

"Hardly," was Seth's response.

"I know that well enough," said Billy. "But, it may give us something more of a test than any race we have been in. One thing has got to be determined first of all, and that is, whether Miss Rudloff is really not the victim of a delusion."

"And I opine she is," Harry added, assuringly.

"How is that to be done?" questioned Seth.

"By spending a night in the supposed haunted room."

"Are you going to do that?" asked Harry.

"I thought I would let you do it."

"All right! I'm your huckleberry in that pie!"

"Spite of your belief in ghosts, eh? But, I knew that would not alarm you. No; I merely said that to test you. I am going to spend a night there myself."

"How soon, boss?"

"To-night. We must push matters."

"Want us with you?"

"No; I must go alone and be cautious about it. I am to be let into the house by the rear way, after night, so that no one can suspect my presence. If there is a ghost I will lay it, or get laid myself."

"You'll look out for that."

"I'll try to, of course— Ha! some one is coming."

A step had been heard, the knob turned, and Billy's words had been barely uttered when the door opened.

The visitor was a woman.

She was about twenty-five years of age, fine-

looking, and of noble presence, being above the medium height and well proportioned.

"Miss Rudloff!"

So Broadway Billy exclaimed at sight of the caller.

"As you see," was the pleasant response. "I have called rather sooner than you looked for me."

"Rather, that is true."

"I have not done so without reason, you may be sure."

"Of course not. But, be seated, for you look excited and tired. What has happened so soon?"

"The Steel Hand has been at work again, sir. Scarcely had you gone than this was found in the haunted room, where I went out of curiosity to see what you had been doing, should there be anything to indicate."

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE STORY.

HAPPY HARRY and Silent Seth had become quiet immediately upon the entrance of the client, and withdrawing to their respective places on the opposite side of the office sat down.

Broadway Billy had taken his seat at his desk, and the visitor occupied the chair nearest to him.

The statement she made seemed to surprise Billy not a little.

"Can this be possible?" he mused.

He took from her a folded bit of paper which she held out to him, and read:

"CLEMENTINE RUDLOFF:—

"You are foolish if you think a boy of a detective can do aught against a hand of steel. Dismiss him, for his own good, and warn him to think no more about the matter. No good can come to him in the undertaking. He can never serve you. And you, beware! Heed my warning and obey my commands. THE UNKNOWN."

Billy read it loud enough for his two allies to hear.

"This is very strange," he said, when he had done. "In what part of the room did you find this, Miss Rudloff?"

"In the exact spot where the other note and dagger were found."

"It was not there when I left the room, that is certain."

"Yet it is certain that it was there within five minutes after you had gone."

"It puzzles me entirely. I thought when you had cleared the room of every article, as you did at my request, I should soon be able to solve the mystery, but I failed, and hardly was my back turned than the mysterious visitor was there again."

"True."

"And it would look as though I had not made a thorough search, but I did. I examined every inch of the apartment, floor, sides, and ceiling. I am at loss, I admit, to account for it. I have heard of panels movable, and have had experience with such, but there are none in that room. To-night may tell the tale, however, for I am determined to see this thing to the end, now that I have undertaken it. That is, with your permission, madam."

"And that you have, you know. I am only too eager to have you solve the riddle. But, see the warning that has been sent. Are you not afraid for your life?"

"No. I have escaped too many times just such traps and plots, and have grown to look upon danger as a matter of course. I mean to get at the bottom of this, now, if possible. By the way, you saw no changes in the room?"

"None. It looked just the same as after the furniture had been removed as you directed."

"And the door was locked?"

"Just as you left it."

"And you came to show me this at once, so that I could take advantage of the warning if I felt so disposed?"

"I knew well enough you would not heed the warning. I came at once, so that you could quickly investigate, again, if you desired to do that."

"Useless, I think."

"Why so? Might not your trained eyes discover something where mine found nothing?"

"I think not. You are accustomed to the room, and the slightest change would arrest your attention."

"Well, that is true. I noticed nothing."

"Have you thought of anything more than you told me at first?"

"I believe not."

"Would it not be well to go over the ground once more, now that you are here? Something new may be brought out or suggested."

"If you desire it."

"You may oblige me if you will."

"Where shall I begin?"

"With the story of the Steel Hand."

"Very well. After my mother's death I went to occupy the room on the right side of the hall, front, which she had always used. My father was dead, as I told you. I am now all alone, and have come into possession of all my father's wealth. The room my mother used had the reputation of being haunted. I know little about that; it was always regarded as the invention of some prattling old servant."

"One night I was awakened, suddenly, to find myself in the most intense darkness. I had never known the room to be so dark before, even on the darkest night. I raised myself in bed to look for the windows, and as I did so there came a sudden burst of dull, white light, and in the midst of it appeared a Steel Hand, holding a piece of paper, which it presently let fall. Then the light faded, and suddenly it was gone altogether."

Billy interrupted.

"Was the darkness the same as it had been?"

"I do not know, but I think it was, at first, unless my eyes had been blinded to a degree by the light. Presently the windows were to be seen plainly enough."

"Here is something I did not ask you before: Was there any smell in the room, such as phosphorus or magnesium would make?"

"I noticed none."

"You said the hand was not over the bed, but as far away as the wall on the other side of the room."

"Yes."

"Well, go on."

"When I could see the windows, as usual, I sprang out of bed and made a light. I am not a coward, you will understand. At school I was held to be nervy and brave. I say it not as boasting, but to prove that I was not beside myself with fear on this occasion."

"Yes, I can believe that."

"Well, having made the light, I looked for the paper, and found it. Then my next thought was to try the door. I supposed surely some one had been in the room. The door, however, was locked, and there was the mystery. If any one had been in the room at all there was no way of accounting for his disappearance. And that is the mystery still—which is your work to solve."

"Exactly."

"I read the note, then. Would you care to hear it again?"

"Yes, if you please."

"CLEMENTINE RUDOLFF:—

"You are alone in the world. In me you have a faithful guardian. Not only so, but a friend as well, if you will but heed my advice. Your hand will be sought in marriage soon, but if you value your happiness refuse the offer. You will repent it in bitter tears if you do not. Seek not to learn anything about me, for that will be useless."

"THE UNKNOWN."

This she read in tone loud enough for the eagerly listening boys to hear.

They had not heard it before, and it can be readily inferred that Broadway Billy was having it rehearsed for their benefit.

"You have never had the slightest idea who this Unknown is?" Billy asked.

"Never."

"You imagine it to be a woman, you have stated?"

"Yes, that is my view of the matter."

"Because you fancy the wording of the letter, which you have studied well, is like that of a woman."

"That is the reason. Men do not write that way. They are more to the point. Do you see what I mean?"

"This seems to be to the point, I would say."

"But, men would not bother with talk about repenting in bitter tears, you know. A man would not have put that sentence in at all."

"Well, I agree with you," Billy assented.

"Shall I make the story brief? I have told it once, you know."

"I would prefer to have it at length; but, suit yourself."

"Well, as I told you, I had a suitor at that time, one Barring Delawater, and only a day or two after this strange event he proposed to me. Only for the warning I would have accepted him. As it was, I refused. As it has turned out, I am heartily glad I did so, for he has proven himself unworthy the love of any woman. His refusal, however, he would not take as definite; he declared that he would wait one year and offer his hand and heart again. That year is nearly up."

"Mr. Weston, it is not pleasant for me to talk

thus to you, and it is only to lend you all possible help that I do so. If there is anything to be learned through it, I would hold nothing back."

"I have another lover, Courtney Clelland. Him I love, and should he propose I would accept him. But, here my self-appointed guardian steps in again and warns me not to marry him. On another occasion I saw the Steel Hand, as I have told you. I awoke suddenly one night, and there it was, with a dagger in its grasp. For a few moments it remained motionless; then the dagger dropped and the hand disappeared. I got up in haste as before, and there was the dagger, sticking up in the floor. The fact of my persisting in keeping the haunted room proves whether I am a coward or not. To the dagger was a bit of paper, with these words: 'Marry not the man you love. This dagger indicates your fate if you do!'

"Now, as I love Mr. Clelland, and intend to marry him if he does me the honor to ask me, I want to know who this mysterious personage of the Steel Hand is. Did I tell you that the hand is a large one? It is more like the hand of a man than of a woman. It appears to be a scaled gauntlet, like those of old. Of course a small hand might be inside, I suppose. But, whether the personage be man or woman, my happiness is threatened, and I must know who it is. I must know why I am warned not to marry Mr. Clelland. There is the story, not at such length as I told it before; but, as you have heard it once, that does not matter."

"Mind, Mr. Weston, I have said things to you as a professional detective that I would not whisper to my most intimate friend. I need not remind you that I have done so in confidence."

"Things told in confidence here are sacredly respected, I assure you," Billy said. "Only I and my boys will know anything of this."

He waved his hand toward Seth and Harry.

The woman turned quickly, and sprang to her feet.

"I had forgotten them!" she exclaimed. "I thought they had retired—that we were alone!"

"No matter, Miss Rudolff. And, let me say this: While you are my client you must trust either or both of these boys as you would trust me. Please do not forget that. You may find occasion to do so."

"I will not forget; but, it seems so strange to find such young persons in your employ. Well, if that be all, I will go. My servants will be instructed to let you into the house to-night, as we agreed. Good-afternoon, sir."

CHAPTER III.

MUCH MORE OF A MYSTERY.

WHEN the woman had taken her leave Happy Harry bounded up from his seat with a whoop.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded.

"Well, what did you tell us?" asked Broadway Billy.

"I told you that gal has bats in her loft, and I want to know if she hasn't proved it? Don't you think her mainstay lacks a button somewhere?"

"Show us your proof."

"Why, see the way she talked about her love affairs! Do you suppose any girl that was right in her head would talk to you like that?"

"She spoke about the delicacy of it," Billy reminded. "When a woman talks with her physician, or her lawyer, or her trusted detective, she has got to go right down to bed-rock, you know."

"Well, you made me give up the ghost idea, and now you won't even let me hold to the idea that the woman is rocky in the head."

"I am convinced," returned Billy, "that the woman knows what she is talking about, and that the Steel Hand is no delusion, or apparition, either. I want you to take that view of it, too."

"Well, s'pose I'll have to."

"What is your opinion now, Seth?"

"As it was, sir. The hand in that steel glove, if steel it is, is a hand of flesh and blood."

"That is it, exactly. No other theory is worthy of thought for a moment."

"But," argued Harry, "if that is so, why can't you find how it gets into the room and out again? That is what stumps me."

"That is for us to find out," assumed Billy. "I shall make the effort to do so this night. I am going to spend the night in that room, and if there is any ghostly appearance there I'll make an effort to learn what it is."

"Maybe you'll get the worst on it."

Billy smiled. He had little fear on that score. On the contrary, he was eager for the adventure.

"May I say something?" asked Seth.

"Hello!" cried Happy Harry. "The Stoic has spoken; he must have somethin' to propound. Let's hear from you, Philosopher, and hurry, too!"

"As I understand, this steel arm and hand appears to come through the wall opposite the door. If that is the case, then it comes from the adjoining house."

"That is it," Billy agreed. "I have been into the adjoining house, however, and can find nothing. That house is unoccupied, and the agent let me have the keys to make a thorough examination."

"Worse and worse," muttered Harry. "I'll stand on my head if you have to come around to my views at last, see if I don't."

"You'll be welcome to do that."

"Well, boss, what is the program?"

"I hardly know whether one can be made, at this stage of the game," answered the young chief. "We can look over the ground, however, and sum-up the points."

"Well, that's good enough for a starter, boss."

"In the first place, then, comes this Miss Clementine Rudolff, a rich young woman whose father and mother are dead. She lives alone with her servants in the old family residence. You have heard the story she told about the Steel Hand, the mysterious warnings, and so forth."

"She spoke of one Barring Delawater. He is something of a sport about town, a fellow who stands well with the 'boys,' but who would not make exactly a model husband. Then, too, she mentioned Courtney Clelland, who is now her lover. He does not 'stand in' with the 'boys,' but he is a fine man, I believe, from what I have been able to learn."

"These two are, of course, rivals. Delawater would not accept his refusal as final, but said he would appear at the end of a year to ask again. Clelland is already as good as accepted. There may be trouble between them before long. So much for that part of the matter. Now, for the mysterious personage of the Steel Hand. When Miss Rudolff was in danger of accepting Delawater, the Unknown warned her against him in a friendly way. Now, however, that there is a prospect that she will marry Clelland, she is forbidden to do that, and her life threatened."

"What do you boys see in all this?"

"Another woman in the case," answered Harry, promptly.

Silent Seth nodded his assent to this inference.

"Yes, that is the way it looks," Billy admitted. "And, Harry, that is another clincher against your ghost theory. Miss Rudolff suspects a woman as being at the bottom of it all, and it looks as though she were correct. The question is, who is the woman?"

"Give it up."

"Well, let us see. It is some one who was at first friendly enough to warn Miss Rudolff of her danger, yet who is now vengeful enough to threaten her. Why did she warn her? Why threaten her?"

"You'll have to tell us."

"I can only surmise. Supposing her to be one who had no liking for Delawater, she would naturally balk his designs against Miss Rudolff. Then, supposing her to love young Clelland, would she not order Miss Rudolff off that ground?"

"That's it!" cried Harry. "You have hit it, dead center!"

"Then your ghost idea falls flat."

"Let 'er fall."

"Then it does not appear that Miss Rudolff is at all crazy."

"Unless she is crazy in love, and dreams all these things. I won't let go of that just yet."

"She couldn't dream up a real dagger, and real notes on real paper! But, all this will come out in good time, or at any rate I hope it will. The question is, who is that woman?"

"Maybe that won't be hard to find out."

"How would you do it?"

"By shadowing Clelland and finding out some gal who is stuck on him."

"Easier said than done, I am afraid. I am trying it, but not with any great success. His circle of female acquaintances is large, and I have not been able to bring suspicion against any particular one of them."

"How about Delawater?"

"About the same. Some of his acquaintances are of shady reputation, but so is he himself, and there is nothing strange about that. Now, you will understand why I am talking with you at such length about the case."

"It's so that we'll get it well into our thinkers."

"Exactly. You now know as much about the

mystery as I do myself, and are prepared for anything that may crop out regarding it."

"But, we won't be in it with you to-night."

"No, but, whatever I learn, I'll unfold to you when we meet here in the morning."

"And then we'll raise our banner and sail in for victory, hey?"

"Our banner, as you call it, is always flung to the breeze," corrected Billy. "And we are on the side of right, every time. You two boys are in part responsible for our banner, too, and I want you to see to it at all times that no stain gets upon it."

"You bet we will!" cried Harry, with much enthusiasm.

Seth did not waste words to declare, on his part, what was readily enough understood.

At this stage of the conference the door opened.

The personage who entered was the well-known superintendent of police, who was friendly to Billy and who had lent him his patronage from the first.

"Nothing to do?" he asked.

"We are not doing it fast, at any rate," was Billy's response, smiling.

The two boys had retired to their seats at once, looking at the superintendent with something akin to awe.

There was an ambition in their lives, and that ambition was, to rise in the confidence of this man as Broadway Billy had done before them.

The superintendent had taken a seat.

"What case are you on?" he asked.

"Merely a little family mystery," answered Billy.

"Do you want to tackle something bigger?"

"I'm ready for anything, you know."

"How does a murder case strike you?"

"First rate, if there is mystery about it. If it's only the result of a drunken brawl, then I don't want it."

"That would be hardly a case, as we talk about cases, Billy. Here is one with all the mystery needed for a French novel. If you want it I'll give you the facts."

"Are not your men on it?"

"Oh! to be sure; but, there's room for you. It must be that you have not heard of the murder yet."

"No; I haven't."

"It was too late for the papers to get hold of it. I'll give you the points. Barring Delawater, a sport well-known about town, was found murdered in his room this morning—"

"Barring Delawater, you say?"

"Yes. What interest have you in him?"

"No use denying that I have some, for you can read me like an open book. He is deeply concerned in this family affair I spoke about."

"And what family do you refer to?"

"The Rudolff family, though it is now composed of only a single member."

"The deuce! Broadway Billy, you always seem to turn up in the right place at the right time. Here is work for you to do, sure enough, work which you are probably well fixed to undertake."

"What has the Rudolff family to do with it?"

"Why, suspicion points toward Miss Rudolff as the one who killed Delawater!"

Broadway Billy was upon his feet, showing willingly the excitement he felt at this revelation.

"Is it possible?" he cried. "What proof have they against her?"

"A handkerchief with her name on it was found in the room, stained with blood. It had the appearance of having been used to wipe a dagger. It was a dagger the man was killed with."

Billy's "Team" were all attention.

"Here is a case, sure enough, now," Billy said aloud. "I don't pretend to know much about it, but I want to set my first impression down in favor of Miss Rudolff. I don't believe she did this thing. She was in this office not more than twenty minutes ago, and I know she believed Delawater to be alive then."

CHAPTER IV.

ARRESTED UPON SUSPICION.

THE great thief-catcher, as he has been called, looked at Broadway Billy in a wondering manner.

Here was something, evidently, which he could not well understand, or at any rate something of which he required fuller particulars.

"I see," he said, "that you are going into the case with the conviction that Miss Rudolff is innocent."

"That is the situation, sir," declared Billy, decisively.

"And you base that opinion upon the fact that she was here recently and said something to lead you to infer that she believed Delawater alive then."

"Yes, that and her good character."

"You have need to go slow, Billy. Don't declare yourself too soon. She may be only planning to make a witness out of you. If she is guilty this would be a neat little by-play for her to make, don't you see?"

"I don't believe her guilty all the same, chief!"

"What was her business here?"

"You ask that because you know I am ever ready to reveal my hand to you, and, since our two cases seem to run together to a certain degree, I'll hold nothing back. But, there must be a condition."

"Name it."

"You are not to put your men on this lay."

"All right; I promise that."

"And you are not to let them interfere with any of my plans in working it as I see fit."

"Both reasonable, Billy. I agree."

"Very well, here is the story, then."

And with that Broadway Billy told all that has been made known to the reader concerning Miss Rudolff and the mystery of the Steel Hand.

The superintendent rubbed his chin.

"There is something back of all this, Billy," he said. "I can now see good reason for your belief in the innocence of Miss Rudolff."

"I thought you would, chief."

"However, we will let the police take their own course and bring all the evidence against her they can."

"Why?"

"So that your work in this other direction may remain in the background. By so doing the suspicions of the guilty one may not be aroused, and we may nab him, or her, before the said he or she is aware of it."

"Then you'd let them imprison Miss Rudolff if it comes to that?"

"Yes; it won't kill."

"Nor is it very pleasant. But it cannot be avoided anyhow, till some other suspicion is made stronger. She has not been proven guilty yet, however; that is to say, has not been arrested."

"She has found my men awaiting her when she returned home from here. She will be required to tell how her handkerchief came there."

"I think I will go to her at once."

"With what object?"

"To prevent her telling anything about this mysterious Steel Hand."

"Not a bad idea, but you may be too late. She has probably been overcome by the arrest, and you will find that she has been telling everything. And, too, upon that will depend in a measure my estimate of her guilt or innocence."

"How?"

"My impression as to her guilt or innocence, I say, will depend much upon how she conducts herself when arrested."

"If she tells about the Steel Hand, what then?"

"It will have the appearance of a pretty fairy tale made up by herself to deceive. You have never seen this Steel Hand, nor has any one else, save her, and it would be easy for her to write the notes and produce the dagger, telling how she had found them."

"Then you believe that of her?"

"Not at all; I am only dwelling upon the possibilities."

"Do not condemn her till there is blacker proof against her than at present. There are a hundred ways of explaining how her handkerchief came there, you know."

"I do not condemn, Billy; I merely look at both sides without bias. That is what you would do had you not formed your impression by what you have seen of this lady during the brief time you have known her."

"My impressions seldom lead me astray, chief."

"Well, let's see how near you are right this time. I want you to bring the murderer of Barring Delawater to me, no matter who it be; that is, if you can get in ahead of my men."

"I'll try it, with the help of my Team."

"Still stick to the Team, eh? Well, they have served you efficiently, that I know. Besides, I remember what you were yourself, as a boy. Now, I go, and you may carry out your plan," and the caller took his leave.

No sooner had he gone than Harry was standing on his head in the middle of the room.

Seth had got up from his place, too, but ex-

hibited nothing of the excitement his partner was manifesting."

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked Billy.

With a spring Harry righted himself to respond.

"The fever is on me," he declared. "I feel it gettin' higher an' higher, now, an' if the top don't blow off the jigger it will be funny, that's all. The pressure is getting high."

"What do you think about the ghost now?"

"What do you think about Miss Rudolff's being sound in the head?"

"I see you won't be convinced by anything but proofs. Well, we'll go into the case and see if we can't make something out of it. You boys may accompany me to the house."

"Whoop!" cried Harry, gleefully. "That is just the stuff, you bet! Come on, Seth; here's a treat for us."

"I'm ready."

"You ain't got no more feelin' than a clam, Seth. Why don't ye show how glad ye are that the boss has asked ye to come along? Why, it's all I can do to keep from yelling right out."

Seth was as stoical and unaffected as though he had been asked merely to step out to post a letter.

His heart, however, was beating high, and he was glad enough for the opportunity.

Arriving at the Rudolff residence, they found two policemen on guard at the door, but on Billy's showing his badge, he and the boys were admitted readily enough.

They found the household in a state of excitement.

The old housekeeper and other servants were in the hall, while within the parlor on the right were seen officers with their prisoner.

Miss Rudolff had been arrested!

Broadway Billy entered at once, the boys with him, and at sight of them the excited woman cried out:

"Oh! Mr. Weston! Can't you save me? Can't you prove to them it isn't so?"

"Hail Broadway Billy, eh?" one of the officers remarked, looking at the new-comers.

Billy nodded, and responded to Miss Rudolff.

"Can't I save you from what, Miss Rudolff?" he asked. "What has happened? What is the meaning of this?"

"Oh! they tell me Mr. Delawater is dead—has been murdered, and they accuse me of the deed! God knows I did not do it."

"On what grounds is she accused?" asked Billy of the officer.

"Suspicion strong enough," was the reply.

"A handkerchief with her name was found near the body of the murdered man, all stained with blood."

"Is that all?"

"Not by a good deal."

"What more?"

"Oh! I am innocent! I am innocent!" the young woman cried, and she wrung her hands in agony.

"What more? Why, in her room was found a dress all stained with blood, and as if that were not enough, in a trunk we found this dagger, blood-stained as you see it. What more evidence is wanting?"

Broadway Billy saw a clear case.

"At what time was the deed done?" he asked.

"We do not know; the body was found this morning."

"When was Delawater last seen alive?"

"About eleven o'clock last night. It was discovered about six this morning."

"Seven hours. You have been some time in getting here, have you not? Why the delay?"

"Mr. Weston, I was not aware that you had any right to put me on the stand."

"Nor had I any intention of doing so," answered Billy. "I was only trying to get at the facts, you see, officer."

"If that was all, no offense is taken. The delay in coming here was due to the fact that no one recognized the handkerchief until some of the blood was washed out of it to see whether it bore a mark or not. Then it was that the name of Clementine Rudolff was revealed."

This made that point all clear.

"But, it is all a mistake," the prisoner cried. "I swear that it is all a mistake, or—a terrible plot against me."

"Can you explain how the blood came on your dress?" asked the detective who had made the arrest. "Can you explain about the dagger? How came these things in your room?"

Broadway Billy knew she had not yet made mention of the mystery of the haunted room.

"Miss Rudolff," he said, "whatever you say now will be used against you at the trial. Be very careful what you say. And, if there is:

anything which you have not yet told, do not tell it at all. I advise that, in your own interest."

Her eyes looked a question.
"Shall I keep the secret of the Steel Hand?" he read there.

And the answer he made, in words not to be mistaken, was—

"You keep *that* secret well! By it you may be cleared of this terrible accusation. I have, as you know, excellent reason for thinking you innocent, so be wise, prudent and reticent."

CHAPTER V.

HARD TO UNDERSTAND.

WHEN Billy said that, the fair prisoner bowed her head as if with the resolve to be as one dumb, almost.

The detective in charge looked from her to Billy in a wondering way.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"It is something which cannot be told yet," Billy answered.

"If it is anything that has bearing upon this case, I demand to know what it is."

"Sorry, but your demand does not amount to anything. I do not know anything that can brush away these evidences, at present, so your arrest is all right."

"But, you believe the prisoner is innocent?"

"I most assuredly do, officer!"

"Why?"

"To tell you that would be to tell you all. I can't do it. If I am not 'way off in my facts you will find out in good time."

"And you, Miss Rudolff; you declare you are innocent?"

"I am as innocent as your own mother, sir!"

"Then why will you not say something to clear yourself? You need not say anything that can be used against you, you know."

"I will not say anything. There is no use in my saying anything."

"Have you come here to take a hand in the case?" and the detective in charge turned to Billy.

"Yes, I am going to try my hand at it."

"And you are beginning with the assumption that the prisoner is innocent?"

"That is the stand I take—yes!"

"Well, I hope you will bring the proof to that effect, for in my heart I am sorry and pained to be obliged to make this arrest."

The man meant what he said.

Billy knew him, but not as well as he knew some others on the force.

His name was Woodmanky, and he was held to be a good detective and a thoroughly reliable man.

"Yet it cannot be helped, under the circumstances," Billy assumed. "You must bear up, Miss Rudolff, and if you are innocent the proof will be surely forthcoming. Knowing what I do, I have good grounds to work upon, so be brave now—as I know you will be."

"I trust all to you, and will await patiently for you to solve the terrible mystery."

"Will you permit me to see the proofs you have, Detective Woodmanky?"

"Certainly. Jones has them there in that bundle. Jones, let him look at the articles."

The man addressed laid the bundle on the floor and opened it.

First he took out a house dress, one which Billy had seen Miss Rudolff wearing only a day or two before!

The bottom of the skirt, and nearly the whole front of it, was stained and bespattered with blood. It looked as though a bloody hand had been wiped upon it.

"When did you last wear this dress, Miss Rudolff?" Billy asked.

"Only yesterday," was the prompt answer.

"You see how it looks," put in Woodmanky.

"Yes, it looks dark enough."

The next article displayed was the dagger.

Billy recognized at once the weapon Miss Rudolff had showed him, the one she claimed the mysterious Steel Hand had left.

It had been wiped, but was still somewhat stained.

Broadway Billy was puzzled. There was indeed much here to raise doubts in his mind.

Then were displayed a slipper with blood-stains on it, the handkerchief that had been found near the murdered man, and one or two other articles bearing the same dread stains.

"Where were these things found?" asked Billy.

"In the corner of a closet in Miss Rudolff's room," was the reply. "That is, all save the handkerchief."

"Had they the appearance of being hidden away?"

"Decidedly. They were packed close down in the corner, with a lot of other things over them."

Billy was thoughtful.

"Your case is a clear one, Woodmanky," he said. "There is no excuse for your not making the arrest. At the same time, Miss Rudolff, I believe you are innocent, and will do all I can for you. Only do as I have advised. Make no statement, whatever, for the present, to any person."

Miss Rudolff was permitted to prepare for the change, and when ready, was taken to the station in a carriage, the house being left in charge the weeping housekeeper.

Broadway Billy and his Team remained there. "You do not, you can not, believe her guilty?" the housekeeper asked.

"No, Mrs. Beauforte, I do not believe her guilty," Billy declared. "We must prove her innocent; that is our highest duty now."

"I only hope we can do so quickly, sir."

"It may take time. We must be patient. By the way, had your mistress said anything to you about admitting me into the house after dark to-night?"

"Yes, sir; she gave me orders that you were to be let in by the rear way after dark. None of the others are to know anything about it."

"Well, I will be here, so be looking out for me."

"I will."

"And these two boys, they are my assistants. If I have occasion to send them here for anything, trust them as you would trust me."

"I will."

"And now, Mrs. Beauforte, let us go to the haunted room. I must look around there once more, and at the same time I want my 'Team' to see that apartment of mystery."

"Gladly, sir. Come this way."

It was a house of sorrow. Every servant was weeping, and their grief could not have been greater had their fair mistress been carried out a corpse.

The housekeeper led the way and Billy and the boys followed her to the room in question.

The door was locked, the key on the outside.

"Was this door locked last night?" asked Billy.

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure on that point?"

"I am positive."

"And how about the door of the room where Miss Rudolff slept?"

"It was her old room, sir, the one she used to occupy. She went back to it when she had the things moved out of here, as you desired. She always slept with the door secured."

Billy was puzzled.

The housekeeper now opened the door.

All entered, the two boys for the first time, and Billy looked keenly around.

"So, this is the ghost's stampin'-ground, is it?" spoke Happy Harry, who had now been quiet for an unusually long time, for him.

"This is the place," answered Billy. "And, Harry, if you will explain the mystery of that Steel Hand business I will promote you and raise your pay. Here is a chance for you!"

"I guess you are safe enough in making the offer," was Harry's response.

Seth was surveying the room swiftly yet thoroughly, and soon crossed to the opposite wall and laid his finger on a spot.

Turning, he looked at Billy.

The others joined him at once, eager to see what he had found.

"What is it, Seth?" demanded Billy.

"Is it not a spot of blood?" the silent partner questioned.

If it had been such, it was such no longer, for the spot had been scraped as with a knife!

Only here and there was a tiny particle of red left visible.

"How did you discover it?" asked Billy.

"By chance, I suppose. It didn't look like the rest of the wall, so I wanted to know what made it."

"Your eyes were quicker and sharper sighted than mine. This spot was not here when I examined the place last time, I am sure of that, unless I am growing color blind."

"And that can't be so," put in Harry.

"Guess we'll score one for Silent Seth, boss."

"We shall have to."

Billy was examining the wall with care, hoping to discover something that had escaped his attention before, but he was baffled. There was not the slightest suggestion of a panel or secret door to be found anywhere, search closely as he would.

The spot on the wall had given him a hope.

Believing Miss Rudolff innocent, as he did, he

had, from the first, suspected the mysterious agent of the Steel Hand of the crime.

It had all come to his mind at once—the entrance of the murderer by a secret way, and the damning evidences against the innocent one purposely prepared and left where the police had found them!—a horrible plot indeed.

And that being so, did not this spot of blood indicate where the panel was?

Had it not been imprinted there by accident, and hastily but carefully removed with the blade of a knife?

The theory was reasonable, but the search for the secret way was as fruitless as it had been before.

"Your discovery was a good one, Seth," Billy said, "but it leads to nothing. It is, however, one link in a chain to save Miss Rudolff."

"Thank God for that much!" muttered Mrs. Beauforte.

This spot on the wall, as Billy told his adjutants, was about in the place where Miss Rudolff had seen the vision of the Steel Hand.

That added to the strength of his theory, but the failure to discover anything further made it of no value.

They finally left the room, feeling that they were only the further mystified.

Seeing the door locked, and giving directions that it was not to be opened again until his return that evening, Billy and his "beagles" retired.

"Well, what do you think now?" Billy asked, as they went back to the office.

"My thinker has stopped," answered Harry.

"Somethin' has clogged the works, and that somethin' is this mystery. It's too heavy for me."

"And what say you, Seth?"

"I say there is no secret way out of that room, sir. If there were, you would have found it long ago, carefully as you have looked. It has got to be explained some other way."

"That thought has come to me," Billy declared.

CHAPTER VI.

INTERVIEW WITH CLELLAND.

"SAY, see here," spoke up Happy Harry.

"Well, what have you to offer, Harry?" Billy inquired.

"Seems to me I had better draw out of this combine right away."

"Why so?"

"My opinion don't seem to count for anything any more."

"Bless your happy little heart, Harry, we couldn't spare you. That would stop our clock for us, sure. Besides, you didn't express any opinion."

"Not express any opinion! What do ye call it, anyhow? Didn't I say ghost? And there you shut me off. Didn't I say the woman had rats? And there you sot on me. Now if I say I believe she's guilty, you'll jump on me."

"I wouldn't wonder if we did," agreed Billy. "Our combination is not going to say that."

"Well, I didn't mean it, but I tell you I'm stumped."

"So are all of us. But, we'll get there by and by all the same. Come, now get your smile on your face or we'll have to change your name to something else."

Harry gave up his little by-play, and was as smiling as ever.

They did not talk further about the case till the office was reached, when they went over it at length.

With all their study and speculation, however, they came every time to the same dead wall, the mystery of the Steel Hand. There, they felt sure, was the key to it all.

Leaving the boys at the office, Billy set out to find Courtney Clelland.

The young man was employed in a down-town bank, holding some responsible position, and was easily found.

Billy sent in his card, with a few words penciled on it, and was soon ushered into the young man's office.

"You are Weston, the detective?" the young man asked.

"As my card told you," answered Billy.

"And you wanted to see me?"

"Of that, too, you were informed. I have called on what may prove a serious errand."

The young man's face was grave.

"Well, please state your business," he requested.

"You are acquainted with Miss Clementine Rudolff, I believe."

"I am."

"In fact, are regarded as her lover."

"What is your reason for speaking thus to me?"

Come, sir, be out with it at once. What have you come here for?"

"One moment and you shall know all."

Billy was giving the young man time to show whether he knew anything of what had taken place.

He was now satisfied that he did not.

"You had a rival, I believe," he added.

"I shall refuse to answer your questions, sir, till I am made aware what your object is."

"And that rival was Barring Delawater."

Billy paid no attention to his refusal to answer the query.

"You seem to know all my affairs," Clelland remarked. Perhaps you can tell me something more."

"I think I can, sir. But, do not get angry, for I may be able to render you a service, if you are innocent of the murder of Barring Delawater."

The young man was upon his feet, his face pale but his eyes flashing.

"What! Barring Delawater dead?" he cried.

"You amaze me. And has he been murdered? Surely you do not seriously suspect me of the crime. Tell me all about it, if you please."

Billy had watched him narrowly.

That he was innocent of the crime there was no doubt.

Of course, the young detective had not thought him guilty, but had sprung the news upon the young banker to note the effect.

"No, sir, I do not suspect you of the crime," he assured. "At the same time you may be able to throw some light upon it."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Pray how?"

"You may be able to point out some one who would do the deed—that is to say, who might be found to have had a motive for it."

"Impossible."

"Think well, sir."

"It is useless."

"Then let me question you. I happen to know that Miss Rudolff thinks favorably of you, and—"

"Sir, are you not exceeding the length of your—"

"I think not. You are thought favorably of, I said, and it may be that some one else had an object in killing Delawater—"

"You talk in riddles. Why do you not come at once to the point?"

"Your interruptions do not tend to hasten the end."

"Well, well, go on. Still, I cannot see in what way the death of Delawater has to do with me and Miss Rudolff."

"What I had just started to say, Mr. Clelland, I will put second to another thought. Are you aware that Miss Rudolff has a rival for your regard?"

"I am not, sir."

"Very good. Now, I know that Delawater would not take the refusal that was given to his suit, but declared that he would press it again at the end of a year. That time is now nearly gone. Do you suppose, out of her love for you, Miss Rudolff would kill him to remove him from her path?"

"Good heavens! How dare you mention her name in such a connection? Not a breath of suspicion can blow upon her."

"In that you are mistaken."

"What?"

"Yes, mistaken; for, Miss Rudolff is now under arrest charged with the murder of Barring Delawater."

"My God! Surely you are not in earnest, Mr. Weston. Say you are only trying me, for some purpose or other, and—"

"It is the truth. She is now in a cell."

"The fools! To think she would, or could, do such a deed. What were they thinking about?"

"The proofs are all against her, though."

"And what are the proofs?"

The young man was pacing the floor in the greatest of mental anguish.

Broadway Billy laid the facts before him, and by the time he had done, Clelland had sunk into a chair with a moan.

"You see how it looks," said Billy.

"Yes, yes, I see, I see; but, she is innocent, as surely as the sun shines she is innocent."

"I believe it, sir."

The young banker sprang up and grasped Billy's hand and wrung it.

"Thank heaven for those words from your lips," he cried. "Will you help me to prove her innocent?"

"I have already set out to do that," Billy assured.

"God bless you in your work, then. But, what do you know? Whom do you suspect of the crime?"

"I know nothing, I suspect no one, yet. I have come to you for help."

"Would to God that I could help you."

"I hope you can. The question I asked you a moment ago is an important one. Think well and answer again."

"What question was it?"

"Is there any other woman who thinks well enough of you to lead her to take measures for removing Miss Rudolff out of her way?"

"Ho! now I catch your meaning. Killing Delawater and throwing the suspicion upon Miss Rudolff would be an easy way of accomplishing such an end. But, think of the horror of it all—"

"Then you do not know of such a one?"

"No, no, I do not."

"I had hoped you might."

The young man had resumed his pacing to and fro, his face a picture of mental agony.

"No, no, I can think of no one upon whom suspicion can rest," he declared. "I am all at loss. How damning the evidence is!"

"It is, indeed."

"Why, it is enough to hang her!"

"Nothing but the sworn testimony of eye-witnesses could be stronger."

"My God! And she is innocent—she is innocent. To save her, Mr. Weston, I would take the guilt upon myself."

"Impossible for you to do so, sir. How would you explain away the evidence they have discovered against her? No; the only thing to be done is to try to bring the truth to light."

"Would that I could point out the guilty wretch to you."

"I wish you could; but that, too, is out of the question. In the sight of the public Miss Rudolff is guilty. How are we to clear her?"

"If you can do it, Mr. Weston, I will give you ten thousand dollars."

"No amount of reward can make me put forth more effort than I shall exert on my own account, sir."

"I know, I know. But, what can I do to assist? You have only to direct me, and I will never tire. She must be saved, and set free as speedily as possible."

"You are very sure you can name no one who could have an interest in throwing this suspicion upon Miss Rudolff, eh?"

"I am very sure."

"And do you feel as sure that Miss Rudolff has not done it herself, driven to despair by the persecutions of that man?"

"Heavens! would you cast such a shadow upon her good name? She is innocent, I can swear to it. I would still call her innocent, had she been taken red-handed on the spot."

"Well, my coming to see you has brought me nothing. I suppose you will go and see the prisoner?"

"As soon as possible, sir. As soon as I can get there."

"Well, she may tell you things she would not reveal to me. If so, you can render her no greater service than to remember well every word that falls from her lips. Something she may reveal to you may be the means of saving her life."

CHAPTER VII.

YET ANOTHER PHASE APPEARS.

WHEN Broadway Billy had taken his leave Courtney Clelland lost no time in setting out to see Miss Rudolff.

The terrible news of her arrest had come upon him like a heavy blow, and he staggered under it, hardly able to realize that it could be true.

"She is innocent, she is innocent," he kept saying to himself. "How can they think her otherwise? Oh! that they only knew her heart as I know it! She is innocent, innocent."

With such evidence against her there could be but the one result.

She was held on the charge, and at her hearing there could be no other course than to commit her for trial.

When Clelland reached the place where she was imprisoned he was excited and impatient. He could hardly wait till the doors were opened to him.

As soon as he was permitted to see the prisoner he caught her to his heart.

"My darling!" he cried.

For the first time since her arrest Miss Rudolff showed emotion.

Laying her head upon his shoulder she wept, clinging to him as though for protection.

"You need not tell me it is not true," Cle-

land spoke. "I know that, and you shall be speedily set free."

"Yes, I am innocent, Courtney."

"No need to tell me. But, why did you not send for me? Why did you not let me know of this trouble?"

"I have hardly been able to think. It came upon me so suddenly, and it is all so horrible. Who can have done the deed?"

"Would that I knew!"

"You do believe me innocent of it, don't you?"

"How can you ask that? You are as guiltless as the angels of heaven."

"But, they will not believe me so. See the terrible evidence they have found against me."

"Can you not explain that away?"

"Alas! I can not."

"Do you mean you will not?"

"No, no; I mean I can not. I am lost in mystery."

"Is it possible that you do not know how the blood came on your dress, and how the dress came in your closet?"

"I tell you truly that I do not know. I wore the dress only yesterday, and did not see it again till it was discovered by the officers."

"Heavens! what a mystery! I know you are speaking the truth, for you could have no object in withholding anything from me. How can it be explained? It must be explained, somehow, or—"

"Or I am lost."

"My God! how terrible the thought!"

"But, I have a hope, Courtney; I do not greatly fear."

"Ah! that lifts a load off my heart. Tell me what it is, dear one."

"It is this, that the young detective, Broadway Billy as he is called, can clear me."

"It was he who told me of your arrest. What does he know? Has he some clew to the murderer?"

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven! Tell me what it is."

"That I cannot do."

"You cannot tell me?"

"No. I am pledged to not even speak of it to any one. I made the exception of you, and you must not breathe it."

"Trust me, I will not. This gives me a hope. But, have you engaged a lawyer to defend you? That must not be neglected."

"I had not thought of it. But, Mr. Tilfrey will do that."

"Yes, and he will come to you as soon as he hears of this. Oh, my darling, to find you in such a situation!"

The rest of their talk may be left unrecorded.

About the same time there was an interview at Police Headquarters in which we may take passing interest.

The superintendent and the inspector were there, and Detective Woodmancy had just come in to make his report of the Delawater case.

"It looks like a clear case," said the inspector.

"Yes, it looks so," admitted the superintendent, "but it is far from being a clear case."

The inspector and the detective looked at him.

"You doubt her guilt?"

"I do."

"But, see the proof. And, there was an object. She hated Delawater, and he was constantly persecuting her with his unwelcome attentions. We have found that he had sworn she should never wed any other but him. She loved Clelland, and may she not, in a desperate mood, have done the deed?"

"The argument is good."

"You must admit that. And, had she not dropped her handkerchief there she would never have been suspected."

"The handkerchief was found, however."

The experienced superintendent spoke with some stress.

"I catch your meaning," said the inspector.

"You think the clew was left on purpose to implicate Miss Rudolff."

"I do."

"Will you explain, then, how the blood-stained dress was in the closet in her room? It has been shown that her door was locked at night."

"That I cannot do, at present. But, while you are at work on the case, give that young woman the benefit of a liberal doubt, and do all you can to find some other person who might have had an object in killing Delawater."

"It shall be done."

"There are some points in her favor, spite of all that is against her. Cool enough to have done the deed, she would have been far too careful to have lost her handkerchief there. Then,

she would never have allowed her stained dress to remain in the house over night."

"Yet she might."

"True; but not probable."

"You are giving her credit for great shrewdness," said the detective. "She has not displayed much of it since her arrest. This blundering work seems to me to be about natural for her."

"Well, well, we argue without proofs. What proofs there are are all against her. She must suffer, unless something to the contrary can be discovered. Do what you can for her, for she will need every friendly turn she can command."

The superintendent took his leave, at that.

"He knows something he has not revealed, I am sure of that," spoke the inspector.

"Strange, then, he would not let us know, too."

"He has his reason for not doing so, be sure of it. Well, we must take the hint as has dropped, and do what we can for the poor girl. I only hope we can clear her, Woodmanson."

"And so do I. If there is any clew we have not got, it is the one Broadway Billy holds."

"Ha! is that young wonder on the case?"

"Yes; and there is something between him and the prisoner. He told her not to reveal a certain thing to any one."

"That is the secret, then, depend on it. If that young fellow keeps on, in ten years' time he will be the greatest detective the country can show."

"I am aware of it."

At that moment a telegram was handed up from the operating-room in the basement of the building.

The inspector read it.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Here is something more, Woodmanson."

"What is it?"

"Hear this:

"TO INSPECTOR WILLIAMS:—

"If you want further proof in the Delawater case, examine well the dead man's private papers. I would bring you this word in person, but I have no desire to spend a term in your House of Detention. For the same reason I sign myself—

"ANONYMOUS."

"What do you think of that?" asked the listening detective.

"I don't know what to think about it. Somebody knows a good deal about the murder, it would seem."

"You are right. There may be something in the super's belief."

"He is not the man to be fooled. There is something in it, depend on it. I will see what I can find out about this message."

All that was to be learned was soon ascertained.

The message had been left at one of the substations by an unknown person, who disappeared before it was read.

There was no clew to that person, and it was useless to try to find him, now. Whoever it had been, he had taken care not to let himself be known at the station, and he could not be described.

"No use, now," decided the inspector.

"And shall I act upon the information?" asked the detective.

"Yes; go at once and make the search, and let me know what you find, noting well how you find it."

An hour later the detective was back again.

"Well?" the inspector asked.

"Here, evidently, is what was meant by the telegram."

He handed a letter to his superior as he spoke, and the inspector opened and read it.

It ran thus:

"BARRING DELAWATER:—

"How many times must I tell you your suit is hopeless? I tell you so for the last time. I will not marry you, positively. Now, if you do not leave me alone I will take measures to make you do so. As to your threats against C——, beware! Before I will see him harmed by you I will kill you with my own hand. Do not goad me too far. Take warning, for I mean what I say."

"No signature necessary."

"It looks darker than ever," the inspector mused.

"Yes, it does; but, who was the person who knew this letter was among the murdered man's papers?"

"Ha! that is the question—who? Some one who is no friend to Clementine Rudolff, that is certain. Woodmanson, I see here much room to doubt her guilt. I agree with the superintendent."

"And the man we want, bad, is the one who sent that telegram to you."

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY HOLDING THE BEST HAND.

In the mean time, when Broadway Billy had gone out from the office, Happy Harry and Silent Seth fell into a lengthy discussion of the merits of the case.

That is to say, Happy Harry did. He talked at Seth rather than with him, for Seth, as we know, was not one to waste words in idle argument. When he spoke, however, his words told.

And thus they were engaged when a caller entered the office.

It was a man, one evidently well along in years, for his hair and beard were quite white.

"Mr. Weston is not in?" he observed, looking around.

"No, sir," he was answered.

"When will he be in?"

"Maybe in an hour."

"I cannot wait. I suppose you boys can tell him something for me, can you not?"

"That's what we're here for," said Harry.

"Well, I have come in regard to the Delawater case, and have in my possession what may be an important clew."

This was something that caused the boys' hearts to beat wildly, but they did not let it be seen by their faces that they were unusually interested.

"I believe he has some such case as that on hand," spoke up Seth. "I think that was the name; was it not, Harry?"

"Something like that," Harry agreed.

The visitor was eying them keenly, and he seemed to feel relief as he noted their apparent lack of interest in their master's affairs.

But, he knew not the sort of material he had to deal with in Broadway Billy's Beagles. Short as had been their interview thus far, the boys had decidedly the best of it.

"Yes, that is it," the man assured. "He has interested himself in it, as I happen to know."

"What name shall I mention to him?" asked Harry.

"Oh! name does not matter," was the reply.

"He does not know me, and it does not signify anything anyhow. Tell him a stranger called."

"All right, a stranger called," repeated Harry, like a parrot.

The boy was making himself to appear not over bright, and the man apparently made that estimate of him.

"Yes, a stranger called, that will do," the man went on. "And you may tell him the stranger said he was sorry he did not find him in."

"To be sure."

"He had to leave town, though, and could not wait."

"Just so."

"And then, you may tell him that the stranger had some knowledge about the murder and thought it best to tell somebody."

"Exactly."

It was Harry who made most of the replies.

"I thought of telling the police, but they would detain me as a witness, and I have not the time to spare."

"Then did you see the crime committed?"

"Bless you, no; but I have some idea that I can help the officers to find some proof."

"Most likely that's what they want."

"Well, I can't stay long. Tell your employer to look well among Delawater's papers, and he may find something, unless the police get ahead of him."

"All right, sir."

Neither Harry nor Seth allowed himself to show more than passing interest in what the man said.

"I will make it a little clearer," the man offered. "I knew Delawater slightly, and I saw him the other day, with a letter in his hand. He talked to himself about it, and I heard him mutter something about Miss Rudolff. She, I understand, has been arrested for the crime. That letter may shed some light upon the mystery."

"That's so. Well, we'll tell him."

"Sorry I could not find him in, and sorry I can't wait."

The old man was making his stay very brief. Having said what he had come to say, he was ready to go.

"It's all right," Harry assured. "We won't forget to tell him you have been here. Stranger, quite an old man, and in a hurry. He'll ask all about that, you see, so I've got it."

"That's it. Yes, tell him an old man."

The man opened the door and was gone, at that, and the partners looked at each other quickly.

"He has picked us up fer flats," cried Harry, in a whisper.

"He may make up his mind to drop us for sharps, before he is done with us," responded Seth.

"Who shall follow him?"

"You, if you want to; I'll stay and tell the boss."

There was no time to debate the question, and Seth was already preparing his disguise.

He had flung open the door of a dresser and taken out another coat and hat, and putting a wig on his head and a mustache on his lip, he was ready.

The man could meanwhile no more than have reached the street.

Harry had taken his station at the window to see him leave the building, and when Seth appeared below he looked up and Harry indicated the direction the man was taking.

It had all been done remarkably quickly.

"Seth is onto his base," Harry said to himself, as he drew his head in at the window. "If he shakes him off he's a smarter chap than I take him to be. Wonder what in all creation he came here for, anyhow?"

The answer did not appear.

"There is a bagful of mystery here," Harry cogitated. "I'll be glad when we can see the bottom, for it is so deep at present that it makes my head swim to look down. But, give Broadway Billy a show, and see if he don't unmask the mystery for 'em. And as for me and Seth—well, I don't amount to much in the combine, but I'm ready to rally round the banner, every time."

When Harry had no one else to talk to he talked to himself, and he kept it up on this occasion till Broadway Billy returned.

"Where's Seth?" Billy immediately asked.

"Give it up," answered Harry. "He went out after His Whiskers, and hasn't got back yet."

"Who was it?"

"Man with white hair and whiskers, came in here soon after you had gone out."

"What did he want?"

Harry stated the facts in a straight manner.

"Was that man in disguise, do you think?" Billy asked.

"Wouldn't be amazed greatly to learn that he was," answered Harry. "He didn't look half as old in the eye as he did in the whiskers."

"And the eye is the place to look. I'm glad you are always on the alert for such games. This fellow came here with a purpose, and he took the chance to come while I was out."

"Guess he wouldn't have left so soon if you had been in."

"Hardly; and he knew it."

"It popped into my head to try to detain him, but it popped out again when I thought it would be best to let him think he had blinded us and then follow him and learn something about him."

"You did just right. Your judgment is seldom at fault, or Seth's either. I am proud of you. Well, I'll take his hint, anyhow, and see if there is anything in the pretended clew he has put into our hands."

At that moment a messenger came in, with a message from the superintendent.

"Something has turned up," Billy said to Harry, when he had read it. "There is something for me at the office, and I must go there at once. If Seth comes back you and he wait for me."

In a short time Billy entered the office of the superintendent, in response to the call.

"You sent for me," he said.

"Yes! There is a new phase in this case."

"What's that?"

"The police have a blind clew."

"They are not of much account—blind clews, I mean."

"Sometimes not, but in this case I consider this one of considerable account, in one way."

"And what way is that?"

"In the way of bearing out your theory that Miss Rudolff is innocent."

"Ha! now you interest me."

"Yes. A man sent a message to Headquarters, telling us to look well into the private papers of Barring Delawater, and there our man found an important letter. Here it is. What do you think of it?"

Billy read the letter, the one quoted in a preceding chapter.

"It is a fake," he declared.

"You think so?"

"I do, most assuredly."

"Why?"

"Well, because in the first place Miss Rudolff

would not write such a note if she really had thought of killing him—"

"Unless she is a little insane on the matter, eh?"

That was something of Harry's theory.

"She is not insane," Billy declared. "Her head is level enough. She would never write what she had once told him so plainly. No means no, and no matter how many times repeated it can't mean any more. Besides, I have the second chapter of this little by-play."

"Your argument is strong or weak, just as it is looked at," commented the great chieftain of the detective art. "But, since you say you have more information in the same line I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. What's your story?"

Billy told about the man who had been at the office during his absence.

"You have it," the superintendent declared. "It is the same man, and if your boy does his part well the game will be in your own hands. Strange they could not leave well enough alone. But, then, that is the way they are caught, a good many times; they overdo it."

"Silent Seth will follow him, no matter how long the trail," Billy confidently assured. "And when he reports, I'll let you know what the result has been. Now, I must go and prepare for the night. If I turn up missing, you will know where to look for me."

CHAPTER IX.

SETH GETS POINTS.

In the mean time Silent Seth had done well the duty he had undertaken.

Taking the cue from Harry, as explained, he set off up the street, and in a moment had his man in sight.

In appearance the man was old, but there was a roundness to his legs and a spring to his step that gave the lie to his appearance, when closely observed.

"He is in disguise, and I know it," Seth said to himself.

The man had not gone far when he stopped suddenly and looked back, taking a good survey in the direction of the office.

Silent Seth did not hesitate an instant, for to do so would be to invite suspicion. He kept straight on, passed the man without looking at him, and turned the next corner.

There was a book-stall, and he stopped there and fingered some of the volumes that lay exposed to sun and wind.

He did not intend to remain long enough to lose sight of his man but he had good reason to suppose the man would continue on and soon cross the street.

And he was not mistaken.

In half a minute or so the man appeared, and as soon as he had passed the next corner, Seth resumed his pursuit.

About half-way up the next block the man came to a waiting cab, which he entered, and the driver started up his horse and the vehicle went whirling away.

For the moment Seth was at loss, but not for long.

He glanced about, in the hope of seeing a cab he might engage, but none was in sight.

A car came along, however, and as that would make about as fast time as the cab could make, the street being crowded, Seth boarded that and continued the chase, keeping his eyes constantly upon the cab.

When Union Square was reached the cab turned aside, and Seth left the car and followed again on foot.

He had not far to go now.

The cab soon drew in to the curb, and the man got out, tossed the driver his fare, and immediately entered a carriage that was in waiting.

Seth was prompt to act, here.

Seeing another cab drawing near, he hailed it and said to the driver:

"Want a fare?"

"Cert," was the brief response.

"See that carriage there?" indicating carefully.

"Yes."

"Well, keep that in sight. Here's your money in advance. Look alive, now."

His words were to the point, and springing into the cab he drew the door shut and the vehicle rattled off after the coach.

Seth made it his business still to watch and not trust all to the driver, and he kept the coach in sight and noted the direction it was going.

At last, after going some distance and having made several turns on the way, it stopped.

Likewise the cab.

A man got out of the coach, a man about thirty-five, apparently, and closing the door and dismissing the driver, sprang lightly up the steps

and entered the house before which the vehicle had stopped.

There the door closed after him, and the coach had already started on.

Silent Seth was again in quandary for a moment.

If this was the man he had seen get into the coach, then he had laid off his disguise.

On the other hand, if it was not he, then the first man must be in the coach still, and he must make sure of that.

It would not do to take anything for granted.

The cabman poked his head around to ask:

"That all ye want, boss?"

"No," answered Seth. "Keep it still in sight, for I must know whether there is any one else in it or not."

"All right. Gee up!"

Seth had noted the number of the house, and even if he lost his man there it would not be impossible to take up the trail again, with that claw to work on.

The chase continued some distance further, when the coach drew up before a stable and the trail ended.

When the cab passed it was easy for Seth to ascertain that the coach was now empty.

That gave him the proof of his guess, that the man had been in disguise.

Ordering the cabby to take him back to the neighborhood of the house, he finally dismissed the cab there.

His thoughts had not been idle.

There were some points he had taken into careful consideration.

This house was not a great distance from the place where Barring Delawater had been killed.

Then, too, it was about an equal distance, in another direction, from the Rudloff residence, where the damning evidence had been unearthed.

It seemed plain that, whoever he was, this man knew something about the crime, and it was not at all improbable that he had a hand in it himself. If so, he had done a foolish thing in trying to fasten it the more strongly upon Miss Rudloff.

Still, as Seth thought it over, with the evidence against the young woman so very strong, was there not just the possibility that she was guilty, after all? Maybe they were mistaken in her.

As to that, it remained for Broadway Billy to determine.

The mystery of the Steel Hand would throw the right light on the riddle, when that came to be solved.

Seth considered that his work would be but half done did he not make some effort to learn the name of this man of mystery, and he set about doing so.

He walked past the house, leisurely, looking at it as any idle stroller might.

There was nothing about it any more conspicuous than thousands of other houses in the city, and there was no name-plate on the door.

Going on, he stopped at the corner.

Here was a news stand.

A bright-eyed girl was in attendance upon it, and Seth stopped to ask some questions.

"Do you deliver morning papers in this neighborhood?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir, my pa does," was the answer.

"You take orders, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if I come to board here I'll give you mine. By the way, do you know who lives down there at 320?"

"That where you're going to board?"

"No; just wanted to know who my neighbors would be. Is that a boarding-house, too?"

"Ye; but a mighty toney one."

"Then maybe I'll change my mind and go there to live. I'm that way myself, you see."

Seth spoke jokingly, and as a joke it was taken.

This girl was about Seth's own age, and as Seth was good-looking, he had found favor in her eyes at once.

"Have you got the rocks?" she asked.

"Lots of 'em, you bet. Maybe you and I can get acquainted, later on. But, I asked you who lives there."

"That is Mrs. Liverwort's house."

"Good name. Do you know the man who lives there—fellow about thirty-five, with red face?"

"He is Mr. Perrymore. He's one of pa's customers."

"Seems like a nice man."

"I don't know; pa says he's rich."

"Chance for you, then, if you work it."

The girl tossed her head.

"I'm not marrying right away," she declared. "Besides, I guess he has got a wife. I have seen him out with a lady often enough."

"That alters the case. Suppose she lives where he does, eh?"

"No; and, that's the funny part of it."

"What is?"

"Why, if she is his wife, I should think they would live together, wouldn't you?"

"Oul to be sure, unless they can't agree, when they ought to stay about as far apart as they could get. That would be my plan."

"Well, I don't know."

"Maybe it is only a lady he is courting, though."

"That's so."

"Is she young and pretty?"

"She has been pretty, but she is very pale-looking."

"Maybe we are wrong in both views. It may be a sister he takes riding. He couldn't do better than that."

"Maybe so. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll take a day off and find out all about it."

Seth laughed, and dropped the matter at that.

"I won't bother you any more about it," he said. "It's no business of ours, anyhow. Well, if I do come up here I'll make your acquaintance, sure."

"Come along, if there is any ice-cream in it."

"Lots of that, you bet."

"All right."

Seth went on, and as soon as he had turned his back upon the girl his face assumed again its serious expression.

"There is a woman in the case, then," he communed with himself, "and this is the one. Ten to one she is the person who has been working against Miss Rudloff. We are on the right track now, sure."

He lost no time in getting back to the office.

Billy was still out, so Seth lent himself to Harry's "pumping machine," as he called it, to while away the time.

When Billy came in Seth made a full report of all he had gleaned while out.

Needless to say Billy was interested.

"We are getting there, boys," he cried.

"Keep the banner up, and we'll come in by and by with flying colors."

"That's what we'll do, you bet."

The case was talked over again at length, and plans laid as far as could be done, after which the office was closed for the day.

CHAPTER X.

THE HAND OF STEEL.

HAPPY HARRY and Silent Seth had each his work to do, but for the present let us leave them and follow Broadway Billy.

It was along in the evening when he made his way to the rear of the Rudloff residence, as had been arranged.

Giving the signal that had been agreed upon, the door was soon opened to admit him.

He was met by the housekeeper, Mrs. Beauforte.

"You are prompt," she observed.

"As I always try to be. Has anything else taken place here?"

"Nothing. The house has been as quiet as the grave, and it is like a house of mourning."

"I do not wonder at it. Can I get to the haunted room now without being seen going up there?"

"Why are you so secret about it, now that you are in the house?"

"It is just as well not to be seen."

"You apparently do not trust any one here but me."

"Perhaps I would not trust even you if I could gain the desired end without help from any one."

"Well, I suppose you know your reasons, but I do not think it would matter a bit if every one in the house saw you. Yes, the way is clear to the room."

"I suppose not, Mrs. Beauforte. Lead the way, please."

The woman started, in the dark, and in a moment the door of the haunted room was reached. It was locked, as it had been all day, as she said, and the key was in the lock on the outer side.

"Nothing has been replaced in the room, I suppose?" Billy asked.

"Nothing, sir."

"I would like a chair, as comfortable a one as you have handy."

"There is one here in this other room, sir; I will get it in a moment. Of course you could not stand up all night."

Billy waited in the dimly-lighted hall while the woman went to bring the chair from the

room mentioned, and when she came back they entered the haunted chamber together.

They did not carry a light with them.

The young detective had reasons for not doing so, the chief of which was that a light might reveal his plans.

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" the woman asked.

"Nothing, unless you will pass around the room and see that everything is in order as it was."

"Why, there is nothing here—"

"I know; I meant satisfy yourself that the wall is as it was."

"Why, I will do that, certainly. What is your object in having me do it? I cannot see."

"If necessary to prove how I found the room, I can call upon you to testify. That is all, Mrs. Beauforte."

"Oh!"

The woman made the circuit of the room, in the dark, and was soon back to report.

"The walls are just as they always were," she said.

"Very well; that is all. When you go out you will please lock the door on the outside, the same as it was last night."

The woman looked at him.

"What will you have it that way for?" she asked.

"And why not that way?"

"How will you be able to get out?"

"I don't intend to get out. If I want to go I will make noise enough to rouse you up to let me out."

"But, your object in it? I don't see that."

"Is it necessary you should?"

"No; but—"

"Nevertheless I will tell you it. I want the room to appear as though no one is here. If I have not been already discovered I do not want it suspected that any one is in this room."

"Well, I'll do what you say, but I don't see anything in it."

"Maybe you will, later."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. If I learn anything to-night, and the locked door plays any part in it all, I'll tell you about it to-morrow. See?"

She said she did, whether she did or not, and withdrew.

Billy heard her turn the key in the lock, and trying the door, found it was locked fast enough.

"That woman is no coward," he said to himself. "And, she wants to know considerable of my purpose. Am I wrong in not suspecting her more than I do? I wanted to test her nerve, the reason I asked her to make the circuit of this haunted room."

He gave the question considerable thought.

If she was concerned in it, he could not see just what her part had been unless a chief role.

And it seemed harsh to accuse her of such perfidy to one who had been so good to her as Miss Rudolff was known to have been; and yet, if Miss Rudolff herself was innocent the suspicion must fall somewhere.

But, he was not hasty to judge. He recalled what Silent Seth had learned, and knew he had to find yet another woman in the case.

Having placed his chair in a corner, he sat down and began his vigil.

The noise in the street came to him as a dull, monotonous roar, and besides this few sounds were heard.

Several times he heard doors in the house closed; but, finally, all was still, and the night dragged on its gruesome pace, he remaining as silent as a part of the night itself.

He certainly had no thought of sleeping, yet sleep he did!

It must have been the very stillness of the house, together with the drowsy hum of the street, that lulled him without his knowledge.

Be that as it may, the fact remained that he slept, and he knew it not until he suddenly awakened, to find that mysterious hand of steel all too plainly visible!

Strong of nerve as he was, Billy gave a start.

There it was, simply a hand and forearm, and nothing more, and these being in the form of a great steel gauntlet.

All around the terrible apparition was a halo of dull white light, light that did not appear to illuminate as natural fire would do, but which seemed to make the background even blacker.

"Well, here we are," Billy said in mind. "And, now that I confront the thing, what am I going to do about it?"

He sat still, his hands upon the arms of his chair and holding himself in readiness to spring up instantly if occasion required.

The hand of steel was motionless for some seconds, the palm downward and the fingers listless, but presently it began to stiffen and straighten up, and the index at last pointed straight at the wondering detective!

"I've a notion to try a snap-shot at it, just for luck," Billy decided. "I'll bet there would be a howl of pain if I did. But, no; I'll wait and see what's coming of it. It's got the drop on me with that finger, that's sure. I don't wonder the girl was frightened."

A voice now spoke, in low but distinct tone.

"Broadway Billy," it said, "make no attempt to use that weapon your hand is on. To do so will be to give the signal for your death."

As he had thought, he was seen.

"All right," Billy answered, promptly. "But, come out and show yourself, like a man, and give me a chance at you."

"Thank you; but I come not for that purpose; I came here to warn you."

"I am not greatly in need of warning, Mister Spook of the Steel Hand."

"You were warned before, but you heeded it not. It might have cost you your life. Be warned now; drop out of this matter, and let events take their course. There is nothing to be gained by pushing on."

"I have only your word for that."

"You shall have the proof of it, too, if you make it necessary for us to act against you."

"And I suppose you want my answer here and now, eh?"

"You guess aright, sir. We must have your pledge that you will give up the case, or—"

"Or what?"

"Or the worst will befall you."

"Have you ever had any acquaintance with me?"

"Very little."

"But you have heard of me?"

"Yes; and who has not?"

"And you know the reputation I enjoy?"

"Yes; you are said to be a very bulldog when you take hold."

"Well, I have taken hold here," Billy fearlessly declared. "My banner is waving, and I'm on deck. I give you fair notice that I am going to sift this thing to the bottom if life is spared me."

"You mean that?"

"I do."

"Then you will never carry out your intention. Now, here is a proposition we have to offer you. Leave this house, and wash your hands of this case, and you shall live. You will never hear of us again. If you persist in remaining you will surely die. Take your choice."

The dread hand of steel seemed to advance a little, and the index finger to point with more deadly intent.

"You have heard what I have to say," was the fearless response Broadway Billy made.

"You are welcome to do your worst. If death comes, well and good; I should hold myself as unfit to live were I to prove a coward to the trust that has been reposed in me, and Clementine Rudolff suffered for the crime she never did."

"How do you know she never did it?"

"Well enough."

"You are mistaken. She is guilty, and her soul is black with crime. She has duped you as she has duped many another before you. Trust her not, but take your life and let the law deal with her as she deserves."

"I will not."

"Then upon your head be the consequences of your rashness."

"So be it. And now, if you are going to open the ball, why, let the fun begin at once."

CHAPTER XI.

BILLY IN BONDAGE.

BROADWAY BILLY felt that a struggle was to come, and he thought the sooner it was begun the better his chances.

As he uttered the words he leaped from his chair and darted forward straight at the Hand of Steel.

He believed that a man of flesh and blood like himself was there somewhere, and he had enough confidence in his own prowess to cope with him.

The instant he left his chair the light vanished however, and he found himself groping in darkness.

But, he did not stop for that, for to do so would invite defeat.

The room, he knew, was empty, and there was nothing for him to run against unless it was the mysterious personage of the Steel Hand.

He heard, or fancied he heard, a movement somewhere, and then came a mocking laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" it defied him. "Do you expect to catch a shade from the other world, Broadway Billy? You are good at catching mortals, but here is something proof against you."

"You dare not show yourself," Billy cried.

"You have seen the Steel Hand; there is nothing more to see."

"Let me see it again."

"Ha, ha, ha! What good will it do you? Know you not that it is not of this world? It is the hand of knighthood of a Rudolff of old."

"You tell a detestable lie."

"Have a care, sir; your life is in the balance."

Billy knew he could see just as far in the dark as any other person, and that no one could see him here.

He had a purpose in making this personage talk.

He wanted to locate the direction of the voice, intending to make one more effort to grapple with him.

And now he had done so.

Moving forward in the direction of the voice, as the man spoke, he gave a leap just as he finished, and in doing so he came into collision with a man!

The fellow went crashing back against the wall with force, and an oath escaped him.

"Curse you!" he hissed.

"You're a pretty solid ghost," cried Billy.

In the same moment the young detective had hold upon him, and the struggle in the dark was begun.

"Curse you!" the man hissed again. "You'll repent this. I'll have your life and leave your body here, another mystery for the police to study upon."

"Two can play at that game," averred the detective. "Surrender to me, or take the consequences."

"Never!"

Billy found the man was a match for him, sturdy young giant that he was, in strength, and realized that he had his hands full.

That did not make him any the less able to cope with the Unknown however.

He exerted all his strength, and the two rocked to and fro, each determined to gain the mastery.

This had lasted fully a minute, when, finding that the victory was not his, the man uttered the single word in a hoarse whisper—"Help!"

Instantly the dull light flashed forth again, and the Steel Hand appeared.

It was close to them, and advancing rapidly, it laid hold upon Billy's shoulder with crushing force.

Billy felt as if the very bones were being crushed in that terrible grasp, and under the sickening pain he was obliged to let go of his adversary.

By the dull light he could see the man with whom he had grappled.

He was a thick-set fellow, with broad shoulders, and a mask was over his face to hide his features.

Behind the Steel Hand, too, was another personage, as could be seen at close quarters. A film-like garment charged with the luminous substance had made him invisible before.

But such strength did not seem possible for a human being to possess.

Upon Billy's shoulder it was more like the grip of a powerful machine than like anything else.

The young detective could not avoid uttering a groan.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man with whom he had grappled. "What do you think of it now?"

"Let go!" Billy ordered. "Be you man or devil, I'll test you with a bullet if you don't! Let go, I say!"

For answer the grasp only tightened the more, and Billy was made to howl with the agony it produced. Never had he experienced the like.

"Another threat," he was warned, "and this Hand of Steel will crush your shoulder to pulp."

Billy moaned in his almost excruciating agony; but, brave soul that he was he would not compromise.

"Do you surrender?" was demanded.

"Never!" Billy grated.

"A movement to draw that weapon," warned his recent opponent, "will signal your instant death."

Billy had been making an effort to get hold of a revolver with his left hand, but now he saw his intention was discovered, so he desisted.

"Well, you hold the best hand now," he admitted.

"And you are our prisoner, willingly or not. Are you ready to listen to reason?"

"I will not compromise one iota. It is use-

less for you to waste time harping on that. It is war to the end."

"Then you will not take your life and liberty, and drop out of the case?"

"I will not!"

"That settles it, then. You will come with us."

On one of Billy's shoulders was the Hand of Steel, and on the other a hand of flesh was now laid.

The man with whom he had had the brief struggle now took his hands and snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists, thus rendering him helpless.

"There you are, in good shape!" he said. "The way you have fixed many others you yourself are fixed at last. How do you like it?"

That terrible Hand of Steel had now been removed, and Billy could speak without being influenced by the excruciating pain.

"You have got me, I must admit," he answered.

"And we are going to keep you, too. You are a smart fellow, in your line, but you are young yet. You have many things to learn."

"Of which I am well aware."

"And you will be even better aware before we are done with you. Now, the next step is to blindfold you."

Not a great deal of noise had been made thus far, strange as it may seem, and care was being taken to make as little as possible.

Billy offered no resistance, but allowed the blindfold to be put on.

He did, though, note well the position in which he stood, in order to determine in which direction he might be taken out of the room. He would take care to note how far he was turned around, when the start was made, and in which direction. From that he would be able to judge on which side of the room the secret exit was.

As soon as the bandage had been securely fixed over his eyes he felt the pair of hands laid again on his shoulders.

He was turned partly around, and knew that he was facing the wall opposite to the door.

There, then, must be the secret exit, in spite of all the care he had used to discover it. He wondered how it could be concealed so well.

But, he was not sure.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the order:

"Now, step forward."

At the same time the person behind pushed him along.

He advanced, and in a few steps felt himself passing through a narrow opening somewhere.

"Mind the steps," came the caution.

There was a breath of cold, damp air coming up somewhere, and at the next step Billy's foot descended to a stairs.

Down this he was guided till four steps had been passed; then he was turned abruptly to the right and seven more were descended in that direction.

The steps were narrow and quite high.

At the bottom of the seven another turn to the right was made, and seven more steps followed, the way lying through a very narrow passage, and so it continued until a long descent had been accomplished.

Broadway Billy's mind had been at work the while. He had been trying to find some explanation for this mysterious passage, and now believed he had hit upon the truth.

In the room, in that side from which he had passed, was a big chimney with a broad, heavy mantel, but with no fireplace in it, and in the adjoining house was the same arrangement.

It must be that these steps were arranged within what was supposed to have been a chimney, but which, in fact, was this secret passage.

He had examined that chimney well, in the haunted room, but finding nothing suspicious about it, had finally passed it over. However it was opened, it was too well hidden for him to discover the secret way.

At the bottom of the last of the short flights a halt was made, and Billy heard an iron door opened.

Here the air was cold and damp, and he knew he had been taken below the surface.

The door opened, he was pushed through, and the door clanked shut after they had passed.

Then followed a walk of some distance through a low, narrow passage, until another iron door was finally reached.

This being opened, warm air was felt immediately, and Billy was not mistaken in believing the end of the mysterious journey had been reached.

When this iron door clanked shut, a voice said:

"Well, you have brought him, eh?"

"As you see," was the response. "He would not be reasonable, so he must suffer the consequences."

"You bet! Well, wait till we mask and then you can remove that bandage and let him take a look around his new quarters to see how he will like the situation. You are in for it this time, Broadway Billy; you'll never drive your tandem colts again!"

CHAPTER XII.

BILLY IN A NEW ROLE.

BROADWAY BILLY was in a desperate strait, and he knew it.

Those two locked iron doors between him and liberty gave him much concern, for being handcuffed he could not hope to pass them.

And, the secret way being so very secret, he could entertain little hope that his friends would discover and rescue him. The outlook was dark enough, certainly.

He remembered, though, that he had told the superintendent all about the Steel Hand, and the mystery of the haunted room, and felt accordingly hopeful, for if any one could help him he was the man.

"Yes, it looks that way," he cheerfully responded to the observation made.

"And you will find the facts don't belie the looks, either," was the assurance. "You'll never get out of here."

"Or if he does," spoke another voice, "he will go without eyes or tongue, so he will not be of much use as a detective any more. How will you like that, my gallant William?"

"I had rather you kill me than that," was the firm answer.

"Ha, ha! We don't doubt it."

A moment passed, and then the bandage was taken from his eyes.

Billy's first glance took in the situation pretty well, and he realized that he was in the company of some five or six masked men.

He was in a well-lighted apartment, the floor and sides of which were of stone and the ceiling of bricks in arches supported by iron beams. The ceiling was low and frowning.

The place was lighted with gas, and in one corner glowed a heated furnace, an open chimney over it giving draft to the fire and ventilation to the room.

On the right was an archway, opening into another similar apartment, where some sort of machinery was in motion.

Billy could not get a good view of it from where he stood.

"Well, what do you think of us?" one of the masked men inquired, grimly.

"By the looks of things," answered Billy, "I think you are a precious set of rascals who are afraid of the light of day."

"Ha, ha, ha! You do us rank injustice, boy. No one is fonder of the daylight than we, and not a day passes that we don't enjoy it more or less. How would you like to be one of us?"

"It seems I am one of you, or with you, just now."

"That's the fact, and here you will stay as long as we want you to live. If you make yourself useful, you may not fare so badly."

"Useful in what way?"

"At work."

"Then you want me to earn my keep?"

"Just so. You will have a good home here, and the world will never know what has become of you."

"You don't imagine I will stay here and not try to escape, do you?"

"Of course not, but your efforts will be in vain. When we are here we can watch you, and when we are out you will be secured so that you cannot help yourself."

"That will be rough."

"It's the best we have to offer you. If you carry yourself straight, you will be allowed to live, but if you give us trouble you will be put out of the way with mighty little ceremony."

"You talk as though you mean business."

"That's what we do mean."

"And you mean that I am here to stay."

"Just so."

"Dead or alive."

"Exactly; and it makes no difference to us, and can't make much difference to you. The only thing is, if you live you will feed on hope, if there is any satisfaction in that thought."

"Well, there is, some. A live man is worth a dozen dead ones."

Billy had by this time taken in the full meaning of this den, and made up his mind he had gotten into a counterfeiters' headquarters.

"Then you agree to work for us, and to give us as little trouble as possible, do you?"

"You demand my answer now?"

"Yes, the sooner the better."

"Well, then, I take the terms offered."

"There you show your sense, for life is sweet. Do you comprehend the meaning of what you see here?"

"It looks like a bogus mint."

"Ha, ha! That is just what it is. You see, we have no fear of telling you the secret, now that you are here and there is no escape for you. We are trying to aid the Government all we can in the matter of coinage."

There was no doubting the truth of it.

Billy had seen such places before in his career, and recognized the tools he saw in use.

He looked around for the steel hand, too, but that had disappeared. It had probably served its purpose and was now laid aside.

There was still, however, much to puzzle the young detective chief.

What were these fellows to the Rudolfs? Why was the exit from their den in the Rudolf house? What had they to do with the happiness of Miss Rudolf? What had they had to do with the murder of Delawater?

It was still a great mystery, and here was a part of it which had not been dreamed of—this den of counterfeiters.

If the police were in search of such a place Billy had not heard of it, and he had reason to believe he had fallen into an unexpected piece of information. But, little good it was likely to do him.

A pair of great iron balls were chained to Billy's ankles, and that done, he was disarmed and his hands were freed.

"There you are," one of his captors cried. "And a good joke it is. Here is a spotless detective actually going into the counterfeiting business."

He laughed at his joke, and the others with him.

Billy knew there was little use weeping over what could not be helped, and it was not his nature to give up.

"Well, where will you have me begin my apprenticeship?" he asked.

"You can take hold there and blow the bellows, for your first lesson," he was told.

All was said in a joking tone, though the men were in deadly earnest.

"That is a good as anything. I suppose the pay will be good, with the prospect of advancement as I grow more useful."

"You will be given your board and a place to sleep, and our cast-off clothing will be good enough for you."

"And it's a lifetime situation, is it?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes, you will never need to look for another job as long as you live."

"That's good. I like that. It has always been a hustle for grub with me as far back as I can remember, and this is a relief."

"You take it easy."

"What is the use of repining?"

"Well, it wouldn't do any good in your case."

"The only thing I object to is this chain and ball business."

"You will get used to that, in time. A man can get used to anything when he has to."

"Well, seeing that I am in for it, there is one favor I would ask."

"And what's that? You are so cheerful that we are inclined to be reasonable with you, since it is all one-sided."

"My detective fever has been away up, to learn all about that Delawater mystery, and if you will explain that it will ease my mind and I'll feel quite content to make the best of the fix."

The men looked at one another.

"How should we know anything about that?" asked the one who had done most of the talking, and who was evidently the chief of the band.

"If you do not know about it no one does, for you have means of knowing whether Miss Rudolf is innocent or guilty."

"How do we know that?"

"You could enter her house at any time, night or day."

"Even so, we could not spy upon her at all times."

"But, I have seen the notes the Steel Hand left for her, and the dagger. If she did not kill Delawater, then your band did."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"Horse sense."

"Well, which do you think is guilty?"

"It looks pretty dark against the young woman, I must say."

"You are inclined to believe she did it?"

"It will take some strong proofs to clear her, that is certain."

Again these men exchanged glances with one another, the meaning of which did not appear.

"See here," the leader demanded, "were you working for Miss Rudolff or against her?"

"Well, she had engaged me to investigate about the Steel Hand before I knew anything about the murder, in fact, before the crime was committed."

"And after that you had your doubts?"

"Wouldn't you have had?"

"Any man would. Well, we'll answer your question: Miss Rudolff *did* murder Delawater, and we know it."

"It is as I feared."

"Are you satisfied, now?"

"I shall have to be, I suppose."

"We can tell you more. We saw her come to her room that night, with her dress all bloody, and we saw where she hid the things."

"That settles it, then."

"And does your fever go down any?"

"It has dropped to zero. But, would she have escaped, only for the tell-tale handkerchief?"

"Not at all, for we would have put the police upon her track, giving them the proofs we held. We were saved that trouble."

"You were not friendly toward her, then?"

"How could we be, when she was the bitter foe of the leader of our gang?"

"Ha! that was it, eh? That explains it all. Now my mind is easy, and I'll blow wind for you with a will."

Billy was ever quick to recognize truth from falsehood, and he believed this statement concerning Delawater was true. The case seemed a little clearer, now, but he was in no position to take advantage of his discovery.

CHAPTER XIII.

SETH'S LONG VIGIL.

LEAVING Billy at work at the bellows, some of the men drew apart to talk together.

Others went on with their work, and Billy was given every opportunity to see what their work was.

This very liberty was all he needed to convince him what their intention concerning himself must be. They meant to make use of him as long as he was useful, and then kill him.

It was plain they never expected him to leave their den alive.

The coins they were making were gold imitations, five and ten-dollar pieces, and their process was their secret.

Billy was allowed to handle some of the stuff, and had to admit to himself the perfection of the counterfeit. The weight, the color, the "ring"—everything seemed to be there.

"We are doing a thriving business," the chief remarked.

"You seem to be, that's the fact."

"Yes, we are. And at the same rendering valuable aid to the Government."

"For which they would amply reward you, if once they could surprise you at your work."

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes, that's so. Wouldn't you like to be the one to carry the news to them? It would be a star in your crown."

"I warn you to take good care that I don't get the chance."

"Never fear. We'll look out for that."

There was a clock in the den, and Billy noted the hour.

It was past one o'clock, and from that time to three the men bent to their tasks and had little to say.

At three o'clock they stopped, and their tools were put away. The fire was raked down, and in a brief time they were ready to go away.

A chain was now put around Billy's waist and locked there, and when his hands had been handcuffed as at first, they were secured to the chain, leaving him only enough freedom for necessary needs.

He was shown, then, where some food and water could be found within his reach; a place was pointed out where he might sleep if he felt so inclined, and the men took their leave, closing the iron doors upon him and leaving him there a helpless prisoner.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy muttered to himself, making use of his old-time exclamation. "Here is a diffikilty, sure enough. I'm swallowed by a horned dilemma this time, and that's the fact. They seem pretty confident, too, that I'm not going to get away, and I don't know but they are right. It looks as though I have come to the end—that Broadway Billy has been baffled—beaten, done for at last!"

"Don't see how they are going to find me," he further communed, after a pause in which he did some hard thinking. "I'll show up missing in the morning, and they will make a hunt for me, but that secret room will baffle them as it baffled me. Then they will set up a howl, and Byrnes will let loose the dogs of war; but, without a

clew, what can they do? Still, it will be a desperate case, and they may go for the walls of that room with an ax."

He was thoughtful again.

"Yes, they may do that, but they can't get here without these fellows having plenty of warning, and I'll be a goner before they can help me any. If I only had the use of hands and feet—"

But, he hadn't, and he stopped short.

There was no use speculating with "ifs," for that word was an unknown quantity in his profession.

One gas-jet had been left burning, out of his reach, and by its light he was enabled to study well the situation in which he found himself.

He scanned the place well, only to arrive at the conclusion he had formed at the first—that he was indeed a helpless prisoner, and likely to remain one.

For the present, at any rate, he gave it up.

Helping himself to some of the food and drink that had been left for his use, upon one of the benches, he finally dropped upon the rude bunk underneath the bench, and went to sleep.

Leaving him thus, let us return to Harry and Seth.

When they went from the office at closing time that afternoon, each had his work to do, as said.

Seth was to go again to the neighborhood where the man Perrymore had been located, to try to get some further knowledge concerning him.

Happy Harry was to observe the movements of Courtney Clelland, to learn whether he had been holding anything back that might have important bearing upon the case.

If a woman had killed Delawater for love of him, throwing suspicion upon Miss Rudolff so as to make a marriage between her and Clelland next to impossible, that woman might be discovered by keeping close watch upon Clelland's movements. She might seek him.

Let us follow Seth first, since by chance his name has been first mentioned.

When he came to the neighborhood of the place where he had run his man down, he looked for the chic little girl at the news-stand.

She was not there now, but a rough-looking man had her place, and having little to gain and much to risk by entering into conversation with him, Seth passed on without stopping.

He passed the house, keeping to the opposite side of the street, and observed it closely without appearing to do so.

There was nothing to be gained by this as was proved.

Still, Seth had hoped that by rare chance he might see his man at one of the windows, if he was in.

That chance, however, proved too rare to fall to his luck, and when he had gone by, he could not say whether Perrymore was in the house or out, and he did not see clearly how he was to learn.

But, he had his instructions.

To go to the house to inquire for the man, without some reasonable excuse for doing so, would be to arouse suspicions.

Broadway Billy had told him, simply, to watch the house. If the man was within he would come out sometime, and if not, he would sooner or later return, since it was his boarding-place.

The uncertainty of it, however, nettled Seth, nevertheless.

He was a boy of rare patience, however, and finding a suitable place to watch, he began his vigil.

He was rewarded sooner than he had thought reasonable to expect.

Just as it was growing dark, and when he was thinking about moving nearer to the house, his man came out.

Stopping on the stoop, he looked up and down the street for some moments, while he idly picked his teeth. Then glancing at his watch, he descended the steps and strolled away.

Seth had been watching from behind a friendly sign, an undertaker's monstrosity that stood near the curb, and so had escaped being seen.

He had taken his station as far from the house as he could trust his sight with certainty, too.

Allowing the man to have a good start, he fell in behind and shadowed him.

He had not far to go, at first.

Two blocks away the fellow turned into a handsome saloon and billiard parlors, and hurrying forward, Seth saw him greeting some others.

Being in disguise as a young "blood" of the day, Seth entered after him, and strolled around the place as though he owned a good-sized slice of the establishment in his own right.

Perrymore talked for some minutes with the three men he had met, and after a time the four took possession of one of the tables and began playing pool.

Seth took a seat on one of the leather-covered settees and watched the games, but watched his man more, though not appearing to do so.

Perrymore and his companions played steadily for nearly two hours.

At the end of that time, glancing at his watch, the suspect put up his cue and donned his coat and hat.

Seth took the hint and strolled out, taking his station now on the opposite corner, where he could watch the entrances to the saloon on both streets at the same time and so run no risk of losing his man.

He could have remained behind and followed him out, but doing that, some of the man's friends might take notice of him.

Presently Perrymore came out, alone.

He moved away at a lively pace, and Seth took up the trail again.

This time it was of considerable length, the man keeping up his rapid stride for nearly thirty minutes.

Seth kept mental note of the route, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing his man mount the steps of a darkened house, where he let himself in with a latch-key.

This house was in a respectable quarter of the town, but the street was not very light, and few of the houses displayed more than a hall-light, with here and there lights in some of the rooms.

Seth noted one thing peculiar about the man's conduct as he entered the house, and that was, that he deposited something in a niche at the head of the stoop railing.

Having done that, he entered and closed the door after him.

After a time, while Seth still watched, another man came along and mounted the steps of the same house.

This man, Seth observed, felt in the niche where the first had left something, and after unlocking the door, returned that something to its place.

"That is the key!" Seth exclaimed in mind.

The temptation was great for him to take it and let himself into the house, but Broadway Billy had enjoined caution upon him.

He was not to put himself in the way of discovery, for that might be to foil everything. Once suspicion was aroused, the case would become ten times more difficult.

"No, I'd better go slow," he said to himself.

"I'd better follow orders and not try anything on my own account this trip. That key will come in handy, though, if the boss wants to raid 'em."

Presently yet another man came and let himself in in the same manner, he, too, returning the key to the place where he had found it.

And this was kept up till no less than six men had entered the house.

Seth's mind was busy with the problem of guessing what their business there could be, since not a sign of a light had been seen from within.

And, as he thought, he remembered that this house was in the same block with the Rudolff residence, and the idea came to him like a revelation that these men, in some way, were responsible for the appearance of the Steel Hand.

That idea having taken root, his vigil was tireless. He felt that he was destined to play an important role in the game. The hours dragged by, and never had a night seemed so long to Seth. It was not till after three in the morning, nearer to four, that the men reappeared.

CHAPTER XIV.

TERRIBLE TESTIMONY.

Now for Happy Harry.

His instructions had been similar to those given Silent Seth.

He was, as said, to play the spy upon Courtney Clelland and learn what he was able to learn about him and his associates.

Knowing the young banker's address, he set out for his residence as soon as he had fortified his inner man for the work before him, he and Seth dining together and parting immediately after.

When he came to the house he was just in time to see a cab draw up before the door.

The driver sprang down and ran up to the door.

It was opened to him, and after a few words to the personage who had answered his ring, he returned and mounted his vehicle.

Happy Harry stationed himself near in a place where he could see all that might take place.

Presently the door opened again and young Clelland came out.

He hastened to the cab, and giving a hasty direction to the driver, got in and was whirled rapidly away.

It was not yet dark, and Harry had to use caution.

About the time the cab started a grocer's wagon dashed along, and Harry caught on behind that and clambered in.

The driver did not notice him, and he was borne safely along, close to the cab, till the latter turned down one of the avenues and the wagon turned up, going in opposite directions.

Out of the wagon bounded Harry and caught on to a car that happened to be just in time for his purpose, and in this manner the cab was held in sight for a considerable distance further, when it made another turn, and Harry had then to make use of his legs.

The final destination of the cab was the place where Miss Rudolff was imprisoned.

There Clelland sprang out and entered with impatient haste.

Harry could not follow without running the risk of discovery as a spy upon Clelland, so he stopped at a safe distance away and set about recovering his wind.

While he stood there his attention was drawn to a woman who was pacing up and down the opposite side from the prison.

She had a veil on, and appeared to be nervous.

Only a little distance from her was another cab, the driver of which was watching the woman.

It was growing dark, now, and the shadows made it possible for Harry to draw quite near without fear of being suspected for a detective.

The woman was certainly watching the doors of the prison on that side, as if in waiting for some one to come out, and Harry watched her, determined to learn what her interest was, if possible.

Clelland was gone a considerable time.

With our license of privilege we may look within the walls and learn something of his errand there.

"Then you declare the writing is not yours, dear one?" he was just asking the prisoner, as he held her in his arms.

"It is not mine," she responded. "I never wrote such a note to him in my life. If I had I would say so."

"I know you would, to me if to no one else."

"And yet you blame me because I have one secret from you."

"Yes, darling, for this reason: The secret ought to be known so that every possible help could be brought to your aid."

"I am trusting that young detective, fully."

"But, he is young, and may not handle the matter just right. An older head would be better, love."

"Well, I must wait at least till I see him once more and hear what he has to say. Then I will ask leave to disclose it to you and others."

"But, you are mistress of the situation; he is not your master; you only hire his service, you know."

"Yes; but I trust him."

"Well, I will say nothing more about it now, then."

"And where are you going now?"

"To see Tilfrey."

"He has been here."

"But, he does not know of this letter the police have found."

"No, I suppose not; but, that makes it only the blacker against me, and what is the use of trying to defend me?"

"Pshaw! do not despair that way, loved one. We know you are innocent, even if the whole world calls you guilty, and we will fight for you without a moment's rest till we have proven you so."

"I hope you can do that, for this is terrible."

"Would that I might take your place!"

There was then a fond farewell, and the young banker took his leave of the prison and entered his cab again.

Happy Harry, watching, had noted a change to come over the veiled woman at the sight of Clelland, and she hastened to her own cab, spoke to the driver, and got in.

When Clelland was driven away the woman followed him.

"Here's a go, sure pop!" Harry cried. "This

cab is goin' to follow t'other one, and here goes me."

With that he caught hold behind the second vehicle, yet keeping a watch upon the one ahead, to be quite sure he was not mistaken in his idea.

"Christopher Columbia!" he ejaculated to himself. "This here is gettin' to be rich, bless me if it ain't. This must be the other woman in the case, sure. Crackers an' cheese! how am I goin' ter foller 'em both when they divide again?"

He gave it up.

"Broadway Billy would give a dollar ter know all about this woman, I know he would," the lad mused. "At the same time my orders is ter foller Clelland an' see what he does, an' who he talks to, an' who talks to him— Hello! ain't I gettin' at it all in good shape?"

He thought further upon it.

"Sure I am," he decided. "Sure, Mike. Crackers an' cheese, yes! That's what is the matter wi' Hanner. The jeebeeb hath spoken. Selah! I'm ter foller Clelland to try to get on track of the woman; that's the object. And if this is the woman I'm after, why, here the trail ends so far as the man is concerned. Any one with brains would 'a' thought it all out an hour ago."

He was trotting along after the cab, and it was not hard work, since he was able to support most of his weight with his arms.

There was no longer any doubt now that the one cab was following the other, for it kept it close in sight.

A considerable distance was traversed, but finally the leading vehicle drew up before a house.

The second went along and drew up to the curb on the opposite side of the way.

Harry remained where he was, for the present, the cab being in a shady spot and he not likely to be discovered.

The woman got out at once.

"What street is this?" she asked of her driver. She was informed.

"And can you tell me who lives over there in that house?"

"No, ma'm; not bein' acquainted, I can't."

At that moment a colored man came out of the area gate of the house nearest to them.

The woman accosted him immediately.

"Do you live here?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'm."

"Well, who lives over there?" and she indicated the house she meant.

"I prides myself on de fack dat I knows ebery family on dis street, 'tween dese avenoos," declared the ducky with a grin. "Dat am where Mister Tilfrey, de lawyer, done lib, lady."

"Thank you, sir."

She dismissed the man at once, turning her back upon him and giving her attention to the other side of the street.

There had been a dim light in the front room, but now it brightened up, and the shadows of two men appeared upon the white curtains.

One was portly and heavy-looking, while the other was plainly that of the young man who had recently entered.

They engaged in conversation, the younger man showing by his manner that he was the more excited.

No words of what they said could reach the watchers without, and since we can imagine the drift of the talk, we will not give ear to it.

Clelland was in the house about half an hour, when he was seen to take leave of the lawyer, and soon after appeared at the door and came down to his cab.

At sight of him the woman crossed the street, and as he was about entering the cab, she called to him.

He stopped short, and touching his hat respectfully, waited for her to address him.

"Will you step this way, so I may have a word with you, sir?" she asked.

"I do not know who you are," was the response. "My time is not my own to-night, lady."

"I will not detain you long, and I will make myself known to you."

She led the way back across the street again, and young Clelland followed her reluctantly.

They stopped behind the cab which had brought the woman there.

"You are working to free that girl," the woman now spoke, bitterly. "She is unworthy one pure thought of yours. Why will you not accept love such as mine?"

"In Heaven's name who are you, then?"

"Look and see."

"Roselle Beauforte!"

"The same; who loves you madly."

"You, you speak as though you have some knowledge of—"

"Of the murder of Delawater? Yes, so I have. I saw the deed done."

"Heavens! You saw it done?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, then, who did it. Surely, you do not mean—"

"The one who did that deed was Clementine Rudolff. I saw it with my own eyes. Only say that you will take me to your heart, Courtney Clelland, and I will never tell what I know, and she that you love more than me may escape her doom."

CHAPTER XV.

A DECISIVE STEP TAKEN.

COURTNEY CLELLAND, as Happy Harry could see, stood as one struck dumb with horror.

And the woman, no longer young, but faded, pale-faced and sad, held out her hands to him in an imploring manner.

"Are you sure of what you say, Roselle?" Clelland asked.

"That I love you?"

"No, no; that you saw Clementine strike the blow that killed Delawater."

"Yes, I am sure. Oh! if you could but know how false she is! She killed him in his own room, late at night, you know."

"If you speak the truth, Clementine is unworthy to be saved from the fate she justly deserves."

The woman caught his hands.

"And I do speak the truth. Will you not believe me? I tell you I saw it all with my own eyes; I rely not on the report of another. Still, I would lie to save her, if that would please you."

"What would you say?"

"I would swear that I spent the night with my mother, and that I slept with Clementine, if need be, and that she did not leave the house that night. That is, I will do this if you will only give me the love my heart craves. Will you? Say that you will, and I am your slave."

They spoke in low, earnest tones, but Happy Harry, under the back of the cab, could hear well enough.

"It is so sudden, Roselle," the young man pleaded. "Give me time to think it over, before I reply."

"How much time do you ask?"

"Give me till to-morrow night."

"Well, I will do that, and then I will come to you for my answer—"

"No, I will go to you. Meanwhile, I will see Clementine and force her to own to the truth, if I can."

"You had better not see her, for she will lie to you and you will then doubt me. Oh! if I could only show her to you for what she is. I would die to save you from her, Courtney."

"I can well believe it, Roselle. But, your statement must be proven, you are aware, before it can have weight against her."

"And I will prove it, never fear."

"Why did she kill Delawater?"

"Can you not see?"

"I ask you."

"Why, her good name was in his hands, and she loved you. He threatened her, and to rid herself of him and the danger of exposure at the same time, she dealt him the deadly blow."

The young banker mopped his brow as these words fell upon his ears.

Could it be possible that Clementine Rudolff, so fair, could be so false at heart?

He thought of the damning evidence against her, and knew that if this woman's story were told, nothing could save her. Still he loved her!

"Is it possible—can it be true?" he gasped.

"You still doubt me? Let me tell my story to the jury and see if they will doubt."

"No, no, Roselle, you must not breathe this to another soul. Even if she is all you say, I cannot forget that I loved her. Let her escape if she can, and let her conscience be her punishment."

"Only love me, Courtney, and I will do anything."

"You would even swear falsely to save her?"

"Yes, yes, anything."

"Well, give me the time I have asked, and in the meanwhile I will make up my mind what my course shall be."

"Very well; but, take warning. Unless you grant what I ask I will tell what I know and furnish the proofs to bear me out in my statements. I am prepared to do it. I have nothing against Clementine, but I will never see her your wife."

"Have no fears; I would not wed a murderer."

She now released his hands and moved toward the door of her cab, and he retreated across the street.

"To-morrow night at this hour," she called out to him.

"Yes, to-morrow night at this hour, or sooner" he answered back.

And so they parted.

The woman entered her cab, and it started away immediately.

Needless to say, Happy Harry went with it, having made up his mind what his duty was.

"Christopher Columbus!" he said to himself, "but this is gettin' thick an' no mistake about it. Wonder if t'other gal really did do the deed? If she didn't, then I guess I know who did. *Selah!*"

He kept as far under the cab as he could, in order not to be seen, for this was about the surest way of following he could adopt.

"Crackers an' cheese!" he further mused.

"Wonder what William o' Broadway will say when I pour this little tale into his ear? Guess he'll think there is meat in the egg somewhere, sure pop. Wonder if Silent Seth is reapin' a harvest like this? I bet we will get there now, with both feet."

To quote his musings at length were to leave room for nothing else.

The destination of the woman was finally reached, and she alighted and dismissed the cab and entered the house.

Happy Harry took note of the street and number, and presently dropped off from the cab and set out in the direction of home, much elated at the success of his work.

On the following morning Harry and Seth compared notes.

Both were elated, and were anxious for the arrival of their chief so they might give in their reports.

They were somewhat anxious about Billy, for he had not been at home all night, and nothing had been heard from him. And, finally, when the opening hour passed and he had not yet appeared, they concluded that something had happened to him.

"What's to be done, Seth?" Harry asked.

"If you ever talked, talk now."

"I think we had better go right to the superintendent, the first thing," was the Silent Shadower's suggestion.

"That's the stuff," Harry agreed. "He will know where Billy is, if anybody, for he is in this case, too. And if he don't know, he'll help us find him. Come on."

Leaving a brief note for their chief, they locked the office and set forth without delay.

The superintendent knew them by sight, and as soon as they entered his office he read in their faces that something was wrong.

"What is it, lads?" he asked. "Has Broadway Billy not turned up this morning, after his night in the haunted room?"

"No, sir," answered Harry. "Somethin' must 'a' happened to him."

"So I fear. Here, Jones, go with these boys at once to the Rudolff residence and learn what you can about Billy Weston."

The man addressed was a detective on his staff, and he set out with Harry and Seth immediately.

Arriving at the place of their destination, their ring was answered by the housekeeper, Mrs. Beauforte.

"Has Mr. Weston gone away from here yet, madam?" the detective asked.

"He has, sir, and very mysteriously," was the somewhat excited reply. "The door is locked just as I left it last night, but he is not there."

"Show us the room at once."

The woman obeyed, and they were soon at the door of the haunted room.

"Why, the key is on the outside, madam," cried the detective. "How is this if he was within?"

"He told me to lock him in, and so I did," the woman truthfully testified.

Jones looked at her searchingly.

Whatever his thoughts, he made no comment, but opened the door and went in.

The room contained nothing but the chair Billy had occupied, and there was nothing to indicate the means of his exit.

"You are sure you did lock the door, madam?" the detective asked.

"Yes, sir; to be sure I am."

"And it was not unlocked during the night?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"And what time did you come up here this morning?"

"As soon as I was up, for I thought the

young man would want to come out. I opened the door, when, what was my surprise to find him gone."

"And the door was still locked?"

"The door was still locked."

Jones shook his head in a puzzled way, and began a close inspection of the room.

"Here are some pretty sharp heel marks on the floor," Silent Seth called attention. "It looks as if there had been a struggle here."

"Ha! that is so!" cried Jones.

"Yes, and here's a button!" cried Happy Harry, with delight.

"There has been a struggle, that is plain," the detective decided, "but it has been a bloodless one. Broadway Billy has been taken prisoner."

"How can it be possible?" queried the housekeeper, in amazement.

"We shall have to call upon you to help us in explaining that," was the detective's response.

"Consider yourself under arrest, madam."

"Under arrest!"

"Exactly. One of you boys go and bring a couple of policemen as soon as you can. Sit down, madam, till their arrival."

The woman took her seat in the one chair the room held, her face very pale and her hands twitching nervously, and Happy Harry hastened out to obey the directions of the officer.

"Why am I under arrest?" the woman asked.

"Because, madam, this is a house of mystery, and the police are determined to get at the bottom of it."

"Then you do not believe that I have spoken the truth?"

"I see only the facts. Detective Billy Weston came here last night to spend the night in watching, and he is gone. We are determined to know how he went and where he went to. The fact that the key was on the outside of the door is very suspicious, to say the least."

"But, it was by his orders; to that I will swear, willingly."

"The chance will be given you. Let me warn you that anything you may say now will be used against you."

In a little time Harry was back again with the officers, and Detective Jones left them in charge of the house while he went to procure the proper papers for the arrests, and a thorough search of the premises. Harry and Seth went with him, and the two were soon closeted with the superintendent in his private office.

Here was marked the beginning of the end.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POLICE TO THE RESCUE.

The stories told by the two boys were listened to with rapt attention.

When they had done, the superintendent congratulated them warmly upon the manner in which they had done their work.

"I do not wonder Broadway Billy puts so much reliance on you," he declared. "You have done work here that veterans might well be proud of. You have as good as solved the mystery."

"Not too thick, please," said Harry, blushing violently. "We're young and modest, and we can't stand it, specially Seth."

Seth was as imperturbable as ever.

Nothing in his face indicated what his thoughts or feelings were.

"Well, I'll say no more about it now, then," the superintendent laughingly returned. "I will, however, act upon this information immediately, and you boys shall enjoy taking part in it. Jones?"

"Yes, sir."

"Find Woodmanson, if you can, and you and he together take this matter in hand. Go at once and arrest Roselle Beauforte and Jacob Perrymore, separately, and separately bring them here. Arm yourselves with warrants, of course. Do not let them see each other till they meet here for the first time."

"But, what about Broadway Billy?" asked Harry, anxiously.

"He shall be attended to next," was the response. "I believe his safety depends on our getting hold of these two persons before they take alarm, and if he is yet living, we may rescue him unharmed."

Seth nodded his head approvingly, but did not waste words to say that he had thought that would be the proper course.

"That's the cheese!" Happy Harry cried, gleefully. "Christopher Columbus! if there won't be a surprise for somebody you can call me a gosling. We'll do 'em up, you bet! The jeebeeb has spoken. *Selah!*"

They went out, then, with Detective Jones,

and the superintendent sent at once for the inspector to consult with him.

While they were talking Courtney Clelland entered, somewhat excited.

He made himself known, and immediately asked:

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Weston—that is, Broadway Billy?"

"We are about to make an effort to find him ourselves," was the response. "I have reason to fear he has gotten into trouble, sir."

"If that is the case I must make a disclosure to you, gentlemen."

"What is it?"

"I believe I have found the person who killed Barring Delawater."

"So do we, too. Whom do you suspect?"

"A woman who is partly, if not indeed quite, demented. Her name is Roselle Beauforte."

"It is the same," was the quiet return. "She will be here under arrest in a short time. My advice to you is not to meet her, for she might kill you, if she has a weapon."

"Why, what do you know concerning her and me?"

"I happen to have knowledge of the conversation you held with her last night, and that is what has led to her arrest."

The young man looked at him wonderingly.

"Then there is nothing I can tell you more," he said. "You may depend on it that Miss Rudolff is innocent, and in my talk with this woman last night I merely played into her hands to pacify her."

"I see. Well, the chances are that Miss Rudolff will speedily be cleared, if our suspicions are correct. We can promise nothing definitely, however, till we rescue Broadway Billy. We believe he holds the key to the situation, if he is alive."

The young man went away, and the officials continued their plannings.

In the mean time Harry and Seth had gone with the detectives to make the arrests.

Woodmanson had been found, Jones knowing where to look for him, and Seth accompanied one to make the arrest of Perrymore while Harry went with the other to find and arrest the woman Beauforte.

Both quests were successful.

Perrymore was found in bed, and when arrested his very actions betrayed his guilt.

The woman, too, was greatly excited, and her wild talk about murder, counterfeiting, and what not, led them to believe her out of her mind badly.

They were taken to Headquarters at once.

Perrymore was the first to arrive, and as he confronted the superintendent and the inspector he tried to brave it out.

"What am I here for, gentlemen?" he demanded.

"You have been arrested for your part in the Delawater murder," was the cold response.

At that moment the door opened, and Roselle Beauforte was ushered in and the guilty pair faced each other.

"Curse you for the confession you have made!" cried Perrymore, fiercely. "It is to you we owe our ruin! No other way could suspicion have come upon us!"

"I have confessed nothing," cried the woman.

"What are you talking about?"

"That is enough," spoke the inspector, sternly. "By your own lips we have a confession of guilt. You are both to be held to answer for the crime and for all the mystery that attaches. Here is the button wanting on your coat."

"Is that all we are to be held for?" asked the man.

"No; you are to be responsible for the life and safety of Detective William Weston."

"What do you imagine I know about him?"

"Everything, and it will be the better for you if you make a clean breast of the whole matter."

"Ha, ha! Do you think me a fool? Well, make the most of it. I guess you will have to let me go in the end. As for Weston, I know nothing about him, and if I did—"

"And if you did?"

"Why, I certainly would tell you, of course." And as the man said that, a light laugh came from his lips, as if of defiance.

The man and woman were sent away to be locked up, with strict orders that they be not allowed to communicate with each other.

The superintendent and the inspector had arranged their plans, and when they had given instructions to the detectives, the latter set forth to carry the plans into execution.

Harry and Seth went with them. Detective Woodmanson and his men, with

Silent Seth, went to the house to which Seth had followed Perrymore on the previous night.

Detective Jones, with his men and tireless Harry, returned to the Rudolf residence to continue their investigations there, with the determination to solve the mystery of the haunted room if possible.

At this house the policemen were yet on guard, and Mrs. Beauforte was still a guarded prisoner.

Armed now with a warrant for her, Detective Jones took her into custody properly.

"You may as well confess, madam," he said. "Your daughter, Roselle, and Jacob Perrymore, are locked up, and they have told enough to make it useless for you to deny anything."

"My daughter arrested!" the woman cried.

"Hard and fast, madam," was the assurance.

"And for what has she been arrested?"

"You can answer that question yourself, so there is no need for me to tell you what you know already."

The woman protested, and would reveal nothing, thinking it was a trap laid for her, no doubt, so she was taken away, and then began the examination of the mysterious haunted room.

Two or three of the men were armed with hammers, and they began sounding the wall in earnest, having little regard for the amount of hard-finish they knocked down as they proceeded, and finally the chimney claimed their undivided attention.

Under the heavy blows it gave forth a sound that was not natural for a genuine chimney, and attacking it with vigor, an opening was at last forced.

A piece of the wall crashed in, and the stairs were revealed.

When the hole had been made larger, some of the men crowded in, and when a light had been provided the secret was laid bare.

There was a framework of steel filled with a layer of bricks, and upon that the wall had been finished. Machinery moved the chimney apart, and so well concealed was the joint that it could not be discovered on the outside.

So much had been gained.

They went down the stairs, and finally came to the iron door, which they set about breaking open at once.

This occupied them a considerable time, but finally it swung open to them and the passageway was revealed, along which they hastened, weapons ready for use, wondering into what manner of secrets they were forcing their way.

Meantime, Woodmanson and Silent Seth, and those with them, had gone to the dark house of mystery.

Arriving, they did not force the front door, thinking it might be useful for the catching of others in the scheme, if their work could be kept secret for a time, to leave the door as it was.

There was a passage between this house and one of its elbow neighbors, and through this the detectives made their way to the rear.

Here they forced an entrance by one of the windows, and began to explore the premises thoroughly.

Their search was not a long one, for they were trained searchers.

There was a plain trail leading from the front door to the rear stairs, over the bare floor, and down the rear stairs and to the door leading into the cellar.

This they followed, and in the cellar they came to an iron door, one similar in all respects to those the other detectives had encountered in the Rudolf residence, and in a similar way they proceeded to force it.

Meanwhile, what of Broadway Billy?

Once falling asleep, the stillness of the place was such that he did not awaken for several hours.

When at last he did open his eyes he did so with a start, at his unusual surroundings, but immediately his adventures of the night came to him, and he realized the fix he was in.

The gas was burning steadily, and by its light Billy glanced at the clock.

It was after ten.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed to himself. "What a snooze I have taken! I guess I am here to stay, sure enough. Wonder what they think has become of me? I'll bet my boys are hustling to find me. But, they'll hustle in vain, I fear, this time."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF THE PLAY.

BILLY stirred about as much as his slight degree of liberty of action would allow, attend-

ing to his wants and partaking again of the scant store of provisions the locker contained.

While he was thus engaged the sound of distant pounding came to his ears, and he dropped everything to listen.

He was not mistaken; there were the heavy sounds, sure enough!

"It can't be the rascals themselves," he declared, "for they would have no need to make such a noise as that. Is it possible it's a rescue party, and that they have got on the track of me so soon? Some clew must have been left in that room last night, after my struggle there."

He listened eagerly.

Finally the pounding ceased, and for a time all was still.

The next he heard was the sound of voices, then the hasty tread of feet, and after that came a heavy rap upon the door of his prison.

"Come in!" Billy called out cheerfully.

"That's him!" cried the voice of Happy Harry. "Bu'st'er open, pards! We are after ye, Broadway Billy. Hooray—hooray!"

"Good for you!" Billy shouted back. "Break down the door, for I am helpless to do anything on this side. Here is a pretty surprise for you, I can tell you. Sock it to her!"

The men worked with a will, and while they were at work on that door there came the sound of heavy blows on the other one.

"Bang away!" cried Billy. "The more the merrier. You will find me here when you get in, and you will find me in a new role, too."

"That is Broadway Billy," he heard Seth declare.

"Hello, Seth!" cried Harry, across the yet unseen room. "You on deck also?"

"Don't waste time shouting," Seth shouted back. "Break your way in!"

The doors were strong and offered a good deal of resistance, but presently they gave way, and both fell in with a crash at about the same time.

Then followed a scene for a few minutes which almost baffled description. The two boys embraced their chief; the detectives went into ecstasies; and everybody talked at once—except Silent Seth.

Presently, though, the first burst subsided, and while explanations were made all around the men set about freeing Billy from his shackles.

"Then it seems I owe everything to you, Seth and Harry," said Billy, as he shook himself, once freed.

"Yes, everything," declared Woodmanson. "Only for them you might have rotted here. They are the best pair of young detectives in New York to-day."

"And the case is theirs, and they have all the honor of it," Billy vowed. "I was not in it, this time, at all—or, rather, I was in it only too well. As you said, Woodmanson, only for them I might never have got out."

While they were preparing to leave the place, still talking among themselves, there came to them the smell of smoke.

"What is that?" questioned Detective Woodmanson.

"I should say it is smoke," Detective Jones made answer.

"Oh, I know that well enough; I mean, where does it come from?"

Broadway Billy had noted it, too, and he and the others were looking about for an explanation.

They were not held long in doubt, for presently a great volume of it rolled into the den from the passage on the right.

"Christopher Columbia!" cried Happy Harry.

"They have holed us, and they mean to smoke us out like rats!"

"Or smoke us in, like herrings," added Silent Seth, in his dry way.

"It means something, sure, cried Billy.

"You did not notice any fire when you came along that way, did you?"

"No."

"Then the rascals have discovered you, and they mean to finish us. The smoke has a villainous smell, that is certain, and it may be poisonous."

"Let's get out as fast as we can, then," suggested Jones.

"But we don't want to desert the den," reminded Woodmanson.

"Nor must we, if we can hold it," cried Billy.

"Here, let's put up the broken door in place, and see if we can't stop it."

They laid hold upon the iron door to lift it to place.

As they were in the act they heard a noise behind them, and looking that way, were startled by what they saw.

There, in the passageway, and just behind where the door had been, a huge iron shutter was being let down into place with a rapid run, and before they could move to stop it, it had blocked the passage.

"Trapped!" cried Woodmanson.

"Look out here, for another the same," Broadway Billy called attention.

He indicated the opposite passage, the one through which the smoke was coming. And, even as he did so, the creak of another descending shutter was heard.

"Quick!" Billy cried. "Let's shove this iron door under it, and so stop it and keep the passage open. If we allow them to trap us, we may die here by inches of starvation."

Willing hands caught hold upon the unbinged door afresh, and it was pushed forward quickly, but luck seemed to be against them. The door caught by one corner on a stone that stood above the rest of the floor, and before a second move could be made, the shutter had fallen to place.

Then it was a taunting laugh was heard:

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! There you are, like rats in a trap!"

"Crackers an' cheese! Christopher Columbia!" exclaimed Happy Harry.

"We are in for it now, sure enough," Billy observed. "We may get done up yet, pards."

"We must batter our way out, one way or the other," spoke Silent Seth. "No time to be lost about it, either."

"Right you are, Seth," agreed Billy. "Lay hold upon something to batter with, men, and we will try to get out this side opposite where the smoke is coming in."

The smoke was still coming in, finding its way through numerous small holes in the iron shutter, and even as they looked about them there came a thump against the shutter, and flames poured in through every hole, crack and crevice.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" rung out again the taunting laugh. "Die, like the dogs you are!"

"It looks pretty dubious for us, I'll be hanged if it don't," muttered Woodmanson, as he was helping to get one of the iron doors into position to be used as a ram against the shutter.

"Never say die," cheered Billy. "Make haste, boys."

"That's what's the matter!" cried Happy Harry. "We may beat 'em yet, if we look alive about it."

"We haven't got long to do it in, though, I'll bet," said Seth, in his business-like way. "This smoke means death, if we don't get out of it."

"Or get it stopped," added Jones.

"And there's no stopping it," averred Billy, "with the flame coming through with it. They have run a fiery furnace right up against the door, and the advantage is all on their side."

"Ain't there any other way of escape?" questioned a policeman.

"No other," Billy declared. "This way or none."

The battering-ram had now been made ready, and those who had it in hand went forward with a rush toward the iron shutter.

There was a crash, a sharp metallic ring, and a recoil that nearly carried the men off their feet, and again came to their hearing the sound of that hated laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! Little that will accomplish for you. This place was made for just such a purpose as this. You have discovered us, but your discovery will mean death for you."

"It would mean that for you, if we could face you," cried Billy.

"You have got all you want to face right there," came back the taunting reply. "You are facing death, and it is not far away, either. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Bang! went the battering-ram again, and yet again, but with no more effect than at first.

The officers were beginning to look at one another with blanched cheeks.

"Be hivvins, but it's a bad fix we are in," remarked one.

"You are right, man," his companion agreed.

"And can't you be after getting us out, Mister Broadway Billy?" yet another cried. "Sure, it's the devil's own imp ye have been fur getting out av scrapes yourself, as Oi have read about ye."

"I'm going to get out or bu'st a button, you can bet on it," answered Billy. "Keep a stiff upper lip, and remember you are one of the Finest."

"Have you got your life insured, Mike?" asked another of the officers, forcing a jest.

"Oi have dhat same, thank my stars," was the response.

Again they made a rush with the ram, this time with more force than ever, if possible, but

still with no success, and the recoil sent some of them to the floor.

By this time the air had become almost-exhausted, and the smoke was stifling.

It was plain they could not stand it much longer.

Suddenly a thought came to Broadway Billy, and he condemned himself severely for not having thought of the scheme before.

"Here, lend me a hand," he cried, springing to where the forge and bellows stood. "We'll see if we can't blow some of that smoke the other way. Here, too, is a vent to open!"

He opened the vent through which the forge smoke had been allowed to escape, and the bellows was speedily placed facing the place where the smoke was coming in, together with the hot flames, and two of the policemen set at work blowing with a will.

This bettered their condition in a few minutes.

In the mean time Harry and Seth had not been idle, but had been making a most thorough exploration of the den, in the hope of finding something that would help them in their desperate efforts to escape.

Presently they came upon a small iron box in an out-of-the-way corner.

It had a lock to it, but the lock was open, and removing it and raising the lid they wondered what their find was.

There a full dozen or more of objects that looked not unlike huge candles, except that they were black. Then, too, long strings on them gave them more the appearance of firecrackers.

"What are they, Seth?" asked Harry, eagerly.

"Give it up, Harry," was the response. "We'll show them to the boss."

Taking the box up, they carried it out into the other room, where Billy was, and there showed their find.

"It looks like powder," Billy said immediately.

"And dhat same it is!" cried one of the policemen. "Sure, many a wan av dhem Oi foired on dhe Boulevard, before Oi got on dhe force. We'll be out now, melads, and don't ye forget it!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

ESCAPE AND CONCLUSION.

NEW hope was now in every breast, and their faces had taken on brighter looks than they had had for some minutes.

The policeman who declared himself to be an expert with the powder was given charge of the explosives, and Billy told him to go ahead and blow one or both of the shutters down.

"Oi will dhat same," was the assurance. "Wan av dhe pieces will be enough to do dhe business."

"Which one should he try?" asked Woodmansy.

"The one where the fire is, by all means," said Billy. "We may get a shot at the infernal scamps."

"Best; that is what I was going to suggest. Go ahead, Gallagher, and show us what you can do."

"Yes, let 'er go, Gallagher!" cried Happy Harry. "And if you blow them all up at the same time it won't matter a bit."

"Oi only hope Oi can do it."

All this had been spoken in low tone, for it was thought best not to let on to their enemies the find they had made.

The policeman got down and crawled to the door, and placing one of the powder-bolts in position, he lighted the fuse and hurried away, saying to the others:

"Into dhe other room wid yez, now, loively!" He had picked up the powder-box, closed the lid, and with a couple of lengthy strides had cleared the space and was out of danger.

The rest were right with him, and all crouched in the furthest corner of the inner room while they waited for the blast to go off and tear a passage for them out of their novel prison.

The seconds seemed minutes while they waited, but they were not kept a great while in suspense.

There came simultaneously a cannon-like report, a shock that flung them back against the wall with no gentle force, and a tearing and crunching as though the very rocks were being torn asunder.

"It's all over!"

So cried the policeman who had managed the thing, in the regular sing-song way of a gang-boss on the public works.

He led the way, and with weapons in hand all followed him to the other room, in the dark, now, for the lights had been extinguished by the concussion.

Bits of fire lay scattered all around, where the

iron shutter had been, and by the dim light they made the effect of the blast could be partly seen. The shutter had been torn loose from one side, and was bent backward, leaving the passage open.

"Bully for Gallagher!" cried Happy Harry. "Dhe same fur all av us!" cried the happy policeman. "Dhat was phwat did dhe business fur dhem, me b'y."

"Let's after them," urged Broadway Billy. "We may nab them before they make their escape."

"Better go slow, boss," suggested Silent Seth. "They may give us a dose of the same medicine if we don't look out."

"We'll take the chances. Not likely they had any explosives except these in the iron box. Come on, Woodmansy; come on, all of you."

The smoke was now so thick that nothing could be seen more than a foot ahead in the dark passage, even with the light from the scattered coals, and as soon as they had been passed everything was absolute blackness.

Broadway Billy led the way bravely, the others close upon his heels, all proceeding as rapidly as possible, and in due time they came to the house by which Woodmansy, Silent Seth, and those with them, had gained entrance to the underground den, where they found a door barred against them.

"They have reached here first and escaped," Billy cried, in disappointment.

"Begorra, dhey left before dhe explosion," declared Officer Gallagher. "If dhey hadn't, we would have found dhem on dheir backs in dhe tunnel."

"I guess you are right, and there is nothing to be done but to go back, now, and let you blow open the other door. They no doubt think they have left us there in the death-trap to die."

"Dhe which same dhey haven't dhough, begob."

They retraced their way to the den, where a light was made, and a charge of powder was put under the other door, or shutter.

This, like the first, was blown aside sufficiently to admit their passage out, and so, thanks to the powder and the boys who had found it, their escape was made sure. They had been in a tight place.

"That's the stuff!" cried Happy Harry, filled with delight. "That is what they didn't have down on their programme!"

"And you two boys are something else they did not figure on as largely as they should have done, either," commented Detective Jones.

"Sh! don't talk that way before Seth," Harry cautioned, aloud. "You don't know how modest he is. He don't say much, but he bears a good deal, and when you talk about him it makes him blush all over."

"Which Harry never does," spoke Seth, briefly. "His face is never still long enough."

The others laughed, and that was the end of their jesting, for Billy called them to business preparatory to leaving the place that had come so near to being their tomb.

Some of the detectives, well-armed, were left in charge of the den, while Billy, the boys, and the others, went to Headquarters to tell their story.

The disclosure of the counterfeiters' den made a great sensation, and steps were taken at once for the apprehension of all concerned in it.

With the help of Seth, who had seen most of the rascals, the arrests were speedily made, and the entire gang imprisoned.

A good deal of the bogus stuff was found in the place, and so well was the counterfeit executed that it was hard to estimate how much of the product of the den might be in circulation.

Thorough search, too, discovered the Steel Hand.

It was a huge gauntlet of steel, into which a man could put his hand, and by simply closing the hand the gauntlet closed with a force that could be made to crush a block of wood to splinters.

Attached to the gauntlet was a great cloak of black, covered with some greasy substance which was the source of the light that had surrounded the hand when it had been seen. By rubbing the cloak with the hands, the incandescence could be made to appear. Its disappearance was occasioned by the mere opening of a bottle of some volatile substance in the possession of the wearer.

The examination of Clementine Rudolff was set for that day, but it did not come off.

She was released, and the other prisoners were held to answer for the crime that had been laid to her charge.

When the work of the detectives was done the

case had been made complete against them, and there was nothing to save them from their merited fate.

These counterfeiters had operated in New York for many years. They had confined their product to a certain quantity, steadily, in order not to create suspicion against themselves, and were rapidly amassing fortunes.

For their perfect security they had bought houses in a respectable quarter of the town, and made their den as it has been disclosed to inspection. Later they sold one of these houses to Mr. Rudolff, one being enough to answer their purpose, or rather two, for the one adjoining the Rudolff residence was in their hands.

Mrs. Beauforte, the housekeeper at the Rudolff residence, was one of the band, and her daughter was the "queen" of the gang. She it was who passed most of the "goods" into the channels of trade. Barring Delawater was the captain of the band, and Roselle was his wife, so called. Later, he fell in love with Miss Rudolff, and Roselle showed jealousy, at first, but when she found his suit was spurned, she was delighted. From that time Delawater hated her, and cast her off. She made friends then with Perry-more, the second in command.

In her spying upon Miss Rudolff, she came to learn of Courtney Clelland, and fell in love with him at sight. She tried every way to win him, keeping her true character in the background, but her efforts were useless. That being so, she resolved to make a bold stroke. She killed Delawater, having arranged everything to lay the crime upon Miss Rudolff, and Perry-more helped her, for he thought could they get a hold upon the young banker they could push their counterfeit product the faster upon the market, and soon reach the amount of fortune they aimed at. Besides, by Delawater's death he would come into the first place, which he had so long coveted. So, the crime was done, as it has been set forth.

But, as is usually the case, they overreached themselves, and in the end came their merited disaster.

Needless to say, Miss Rudolff was cleared and fully exonerated, while the guilty wretches were punished as their crimes deserved.

The den was cleaned out, and it was blown up with explosives and filled in with earth, all traces of it being removed and the houses restored to their former order.

Courtney Clelland and Clementine Rudolff were married, but they did not go to reside in the Rudolff residence. That had too many unpleasant memories; and besides, the young banker had a new and finer residence already prepared for his admirable bride, in which they are duly happy, as they deserved to be.

The press and the police made much of Broadway Billy and his tandems, but they did them no more honor than was justly earned. Billy's banner had been lifted even higher than before, and around it his devoted allies rallied for further conquests in their chosen field. Seth had not much to say, but his determined face was index enough to his intentions. Harry was outspoken, of course.

"Here we are," he declared, boldly; "riper than ever for any diffikilty! We'll tackle anything, from a ghost to the mafias. Christopher Columbia! but we *did* make things hum that time, though! And we'll do it again, too—crackers an' cheese, yes! The jeebeeb hath spoken. Selah!"

THE END.

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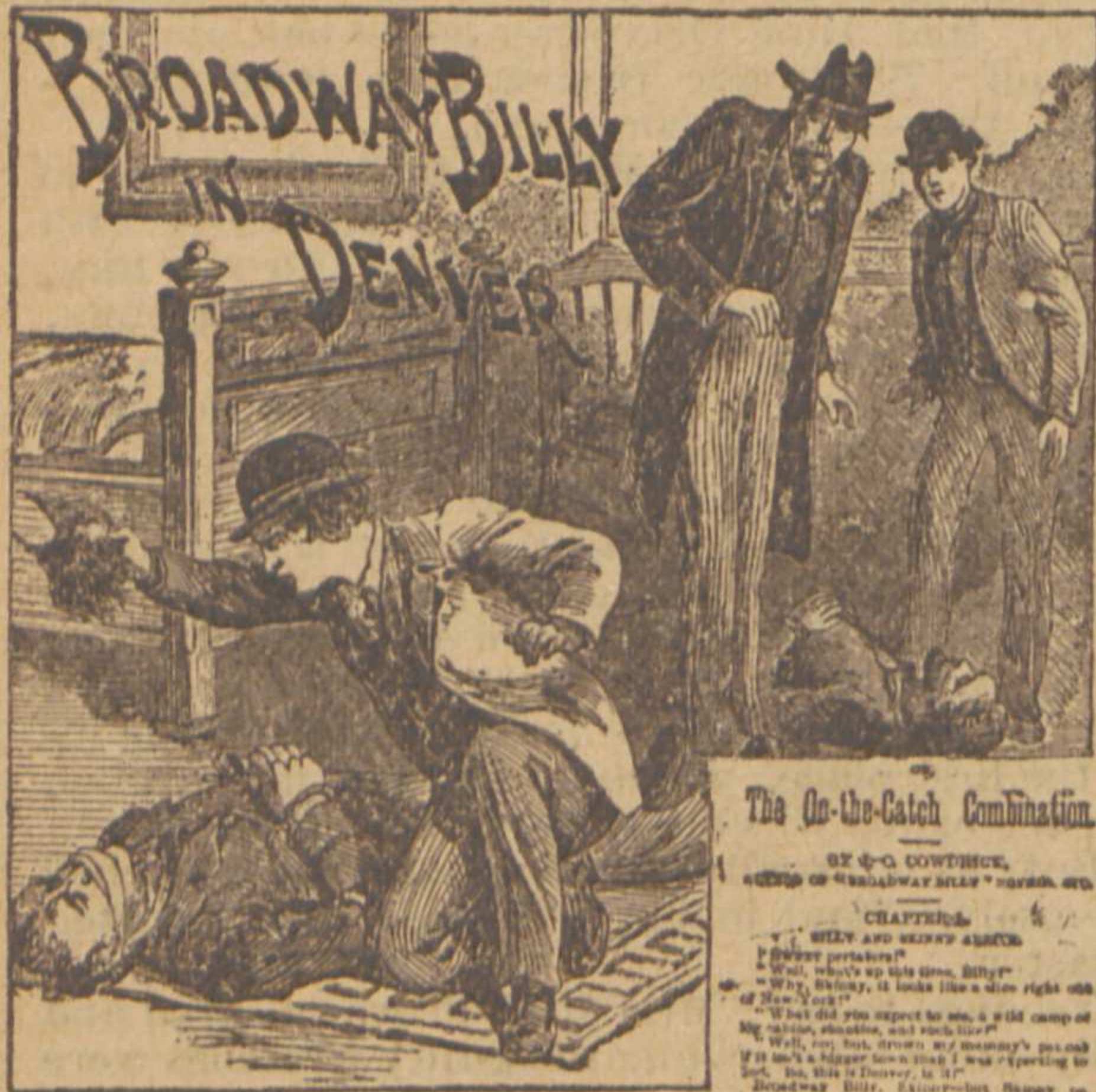
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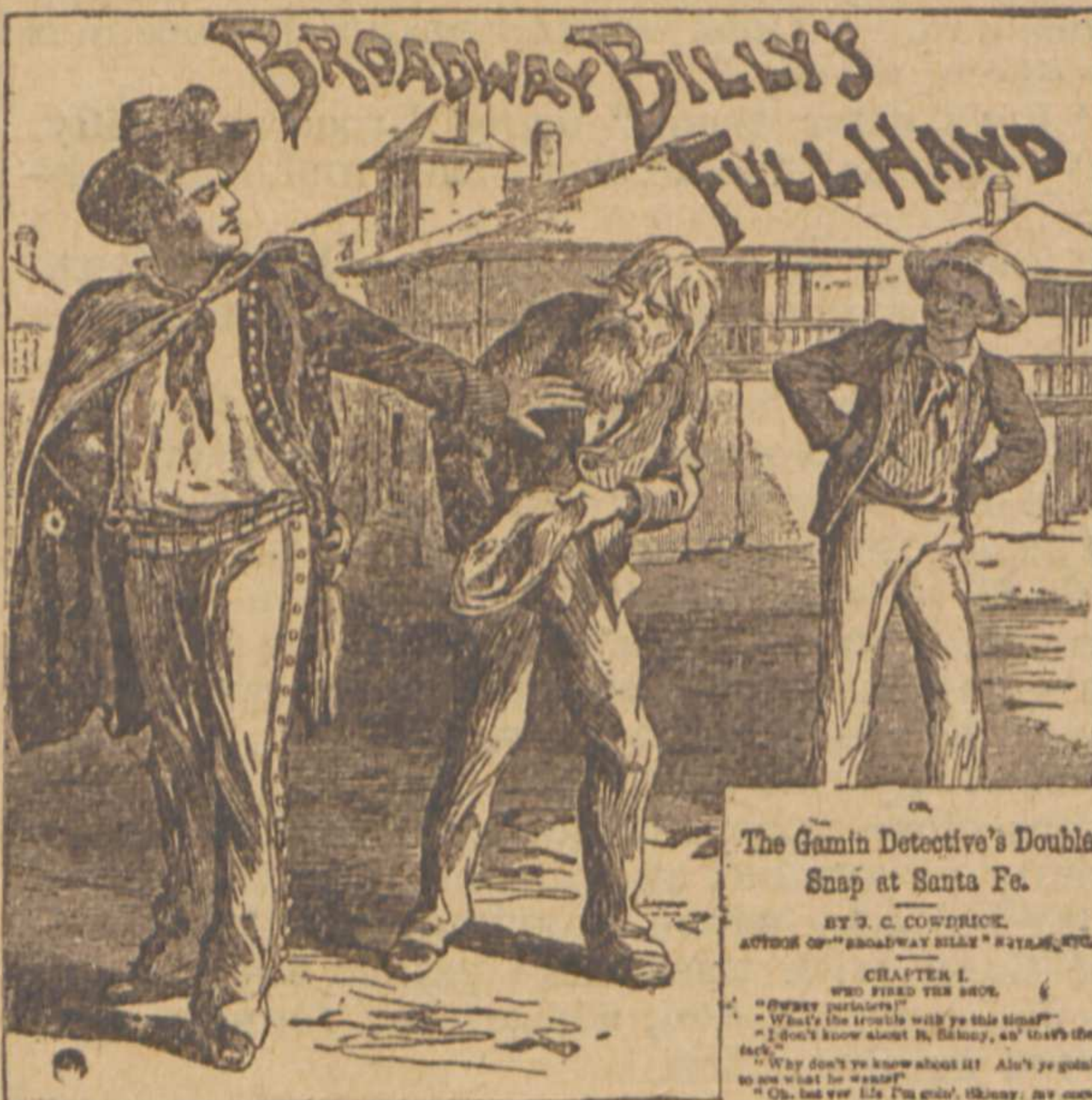
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